

# Adroit Accountability or Keeping a Step Ahead

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## Abstract

From its inception, the United States Cooperative Extension System has had a history of being accountable for its programs and funding. With accountability becoming of even greater importance, plans and proactive efforts must be undertaken to assure that useful program accomplishment information is made available to identified audiences in an aggressive manner. Yet, remaining continuously vigilant to the changing circumstances or political landscapes within a county or state is a critical *must* to assure that when questions of the value of Extension programs arise, its programs and budgets can withstand the scrutiny. Three case studies are described in which proactive measures have been undertaken to have program information readily available and provide needed account-

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ability information in a timely manner to policy makers and citizens. Changing political directions in the county governments and their implications are explained. Significant accountability measures prior to certain policy shifts, during the stressful period that resulted, and following the shifts, resulted in strong Extension programs being able to cope with adversity or even to gain greater support. In circumstances of political tranquility or in periods of great change, a large measure of organizational risk can be avoided by keeping Extension's accountability a step ahead of inevitable changing circumstances.

Since its inception, the United States Cooperative Extension System has been held accountable, by federal law, for its programming and its budget (Rasmussen, 1989). Many other Extension partners—including the states and counties or cities that provide taxpayer funding and other groups and individuals that provide private funding—also expect, and often require, different types of accountability information. Changing demographics and politics can change what is expected. If the expectations for accountability information are not met, there can be negative consequences: reduced funding, employee layoffs, and office closures, among them. To avoid such results, a focus should be maintained on providing the right information to the right people at the right time in the right format (NCCESTMTF, 1998).

This paper examines three cases in which changed political or other circumstances caused Extension to change its way of providing local leaders with accountability information. These case studies, as well as evidence from similar circumstances in other locations, indicate that it may be wise to establish ongoing accountability systems to ensure some degree of organizational protection when major political or other situational changes occur.

### **A Western North Carolina County Experience**

In a western North Carolina county, changing demographics and a changing political climate have placed all county departments on alert for policy changes. In addition to strong agricul-

tural and manufacturing sectors, the county has a rapidly growing retirement community.

County citizens have been heavily involved in planning, implementing and marketing Cooperative Extension programs; and the Extension staff has been on the forefront in using program impact information when communicating to elected officials, clientele, the general public, its advisory committees, and other local groups. The staff makes a concerted effort to publish success stories that show significant program benefits to the community and its citizens. State-level administrators have pointed to this county's approach as a model for others, and additional accolades have come from the governor, some county commissioners, and many citizens.

The county commissioners have consistently supported the Extension program. However, in two recent elections, newcomers who knew little about Extension or agriculture won positions of leadership. Given these changes, the county Extension staff decided to focus even more specifically on internal accountability. The county Extension director (CED) shared program information at county department heads' meetings and sent to the county manager a quarterly packet containing brochures, flyers and similar materials showing program activities, citizen involvement, and positive program results. The CED also provided a letter and information about Extension to new county commissioners. The commissioners and county manager also are among those invited to the annual report-to-the-people meeting. Usually, three of the five commissioners attend.

Extension staff members also discuss programs with commissioners when the opportunity arises—for example, when commissioners are asked to participate in Extension programs, such as to serve as *chair* for Farm-City Day activities or to deliver the keynote address at county volunteer recognition ceremonies.

### ***Changed Circumstances Requiring Program Defense***

In 1999, the board of commissioners, in concert with the county manager, set a generally conservative fiscal climate. Each county department was instructed to justify its programs or face serious budget scrutiny.

### ***Present Situation***

manager's office for inclusion in a monthly packet for commissioners. "Program effectiveness was never addressed," the CED said.

The Extension staff also invited the Extension Advisory Council and county commissioners to an annual report-to-the-people luncheon. During the luncheon, the staff provided a summary of their activities and gave the commissioners a written report. For many years the report was a book, but, when it became clear that the book was not being read, the staff changed the format to a bulletin. Still, the bulletin was apparently no better than the book: Most commissioners left their copies at the luncheon.

Now, the staff provides only a one-page summary to the commissioners each month. The brief summary includes individual narratives focusing exclusively on program outcomes rather than activities. This impact-laden, single-page summary has proven to be quite popular with the commissioners and the county manager; and a single sheet entitled *Johnston County Success Stories* has proven especially popular with the commissioners. This leaflet contains people-oriented successes resulting from Extension's programs. The commissioners have requested copies of these leaflets to hand out during speaking engagements, and they have indicated that the stories demonstrate that tax dollars they appropriate for Extension produce real benefits to county citizens. Moreover, the commissioners use the success stories to communicate how efficiently they are spending taxpayers' money.

### ***Impacts on Extension Programs From Political Change***

Although Johnston County's entire political landscape changed rather quickly, Cooperative Extension's programs were never threatened. Credit is due to Extension's long-standing efforts to involve and educate a large number of county citizens about its programs. An active Advisory Leadership System gave structure to the citizen support and input efforts. Also, a continuous effort to market programs in local newspapers helped citizens to be aware of Extension's presence in the county and of its many activities. However, the staff's ability to recognize and immediately respond to the shifting need to report program impacts, rather than activities, helped lead the commissioners to view Extension as an agency worthy of strong support. Indeed, Extension's budget

Through its many proactive and ongoing accountability and program marketing efforts, Cooperative Extension engendered needed support while some other county departments faced major adjustments. Some departments had employee dismissals; in others, there were personnel shifts. While each county department is being reviewed by the commissioners, no negative actions have faced Cooperative Extension. The CED credits the staff's sustained accountability efforts and citizen support for enabling the county center to satisfactorily weather the intense budget and program cuts in the county government.

### **Johnston County Extension Faced Changed Situation**

Johnston County is in the east central part of North Carolina, adjacent to the bustling metropolitan Research Triangle area, which includes Raleigh and Durham. This historically agricultural county now has the fastest-growing population in the state. Rapid growth and changing demographics have led to political change.

Traditionally, members of the board of commissioners have come predominantly from one party. The past two elections, however, have changed the board's composition. The new board replaced the county manager of 18 years with someone more suited to the majority of the commissioners. It quickly became clear that the new administration had a greater interest in accountability than the ousted administration had shown. The CED reported that the administration now emphasized each county agency's program impacts more than its program activities.

#### ***Past Accountability Functions***

Johnston County Extension has long had a system of reporting accountability information to the county administration and the general public. The Extension staff indicated, however, that they never knew whether administrators were listening. The CED said, "We were going through the motions and our faithful (advisory groups) were listening, but we did not know about the commissioners."

Still, the staff persevered. Each month, individual staff members compiled information on the number of group activities, the number of individual contacts, and the use of mass media. This information, along with a short narrative of staff activities, was summarized and delivered to the county

has risen 30 percent over the past two years, and an additional, county-funded, agent position has been added.

Proactive accountability and continuous program marketing has proven to be effective for Johnston County Extension. The shift to reporting program benefits to people rather than activities has been the impetus for significantly increased support in this new political landscape.

## **Palm Beach County Makes Proactive Adjustments**

Palm Beach County, Florida, is a diverse county with a population of more than 1 million. A major production agricultural industry of 565,000 acres lies on its west side; and its major population center, with significant tourism and other industries, lies on its east side. In the early 1990s, changing political circumstances and a trend toward higher expectations for accountability significantly affected Palm Beach County's Extension program.

In 1993, a recession and the county commissioners' reinventing-government emphasis led to budget problems. Several new commissioners had been elected recently, and a new chair was chosen. Budget issues hit Cooperative Extension first, since the agency was at the top of an alphabetical agency list prepared for a budget workshop. Extension reached out to involve its supporters, but it had to be cautious: The chair of the county board of commissioners threatened to fire the CED if the supporters "got too carried away."

### ***Response to Adversity***

As county commissioners worked through the budget process, Extension called together a group of citizens to study Extension's operations and to recommend changes. The group included a mix of Extension's friends as well as people who knew nothing about the agency. It ultimately made several recommendations, the most important of which turned out to be finding new funding sources.

By acquiring grants and other funding, Extension in Palm Beach County became much stronger. Private support has been about \$250,000 a year, including a significant sum from the Friends of the Mounts Botanical Garden. This support group has helped to focus and capture support from the urban horticultural audience. The botanical garden support group is

very close to reaching an agreement with the county whereby 100 more acres can be developed as a major new botanical garden attraction that will be privatized. The garden is projected to be a \$30 million capital project. The county has committed \$1 million, and a private donor is expected to commit \$5 million before the end of the year.

Meanwhile, the Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) program, which was most in jeopardy from the budget cuts, secured nearly \$200,000 for a nutrition program and \$20,000 from the city of West Palm Beach to pay a half-time agent to help first-time home buyers gain financial management skills.

Extension also has begun charging for some programs. The most expensive is a professional landscape management course for industry personnel: The registration is \$250, and about 20 to 25 people enroll in the annual course. A course for sugar-cane growers is much less expensive—\$25 for 16 sessions.

The county has never pointed to the increased private support as a reason for cutting county support. Instead, in at least two cases, the county has provided funds to match grants from other sources. It appears that more aggressive efforts to seek outside funding generated more respect and created a strong partnership with county government.

### ***Extension Looked to for Leadership***

In 1994, the county was funding a strong economic development program, and officials turned to Extension for leadership in agricultural development. County officials have set high expectations: They expect new jobs, new businesses, and new value-added products to result from their investments. With \$500,000 in funding, Extension formed an agricultural enhancement council to provide consultation and guidance. This council, with a \$200,000 annual budget, is ongoing.

Meanwhile, the county Extension department has tried to take advantage of every opportunity that allows an Extension agent to be involved in projects of importance to the county commissioners. This has included the restoration and cleanup of the Lake Worth Lagoon, the inter-coastal waterway in Palm Beach County, as well as issues related to the agricultural reserve that is under tremendous pressure for urban development.

## Conclusion and Implications

Each of these cases demonstrates many key components of an effective accountability system (Liles, 1998). Cooperative Extension's programs must be effective, inclusive and meaningful to its audiences. Extension must communicate to those audiences the impact that its programs have on participants (Jackson & Smith, 1999). Furthermore, other audiences, including the general public, need to be informed of program successes. These informational initiatives must be planned and maintained (Richardson, 1999). Such an ongoing accountability program will enable Extension to be prepared when circumstances change.

To be effective, Extension must package its accountability efforts using the same criteria that it uses to package its educational programs: The communications medium must be formatted so the user can understand and interpret the intended message correctly. While Extension clientele seek information that is relevant to their situations, the people appropriating tax dollars want information that will assure voters that they are using the money in an efficient manner (Richardson, 1999).

As a nonmandated public entity, Cooperative Extension must continuously project its program impacts as an established rationale for public funding (Jackson & Smith, 1999). To accomplish this informational effort, public relations and program marketing efforts must be a prime consideration. Gone are the days when Extension can expect that its commissioners or legislators grew up on a farm or had grandparents in farming; indeed, many new commissioners and legislators have never heard of Cooperative Extension. The question should be asked, "If we are doing all of these wonderful things, why have some people never even heard that Extension exists?" (J. Staton, personal communication, November 10, 1999). Part of the answer might be that many Extension employees produce positive impacts but fail to communicate those program benefits effectively. Sometimes, Extension workers do not appreciate the need to market Extension programs until it is too late or until great pressure is exerted. In this regard, many agents may be described as wishing to hide from view (Boyle, 1999). These people are usually very dedicated individuals who do their *job* well and feel that is enough for the program to market itself. Yet, in the competi-

tion among agencies for public money, those who expect their good work to communicate its worth may come up woefully short (Boyle, 1999).

Programs that produce real results among real people are the ones that gain the support of policy makers. Effectively communicating the impacts of those programs to the correct audiences should also be a major focus (Jackson & Smith, 1999). The communication must enable the audience to understand and appreciate the programs.

Political change can bring to the table decision makers who lack a traditional understanding or appreciation for Cooperative Extension's programs. They can gain that appreciation if they come to understand the relevance of Extension's programs in responding to real needs. Program relevance comes from effective listening and responding to clientele; it continues to be the foundation for support of Extension (Human & Carnegie 1998).

One of the most effective means of ensuring program accountability is by empowering programs by and with the people. To adequately deal with changed situations and policies, Extension must be proactive in communicating program outcomes. Questions of relevance and program viability will arise at times. But an adroit accountability effort that is well-planned and implemented—one that explains Extension's program impacts—can help the organization stay at least a step ahead of these questions.

## Key Words

Accountability, Extension, impacts, programs, funding, political.

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