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## Forming a Multistate Network: From Passion and Coincidence to Vision and Sustainability

James S. Bates  
*Ohio State University*

Jacquelyn J. Benson  
*University of Missouri*

Erin L. Yelland  
*Kansas State University*



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## **Forming a Multistate Network: From Passion and Coincidence to Vision and Sustainability**

### **Abstract**

The North Central Region Aging Network (NCRAN) formed out of a need to strengthen the potential for meeting curricular and educational demands related to the topic of aging. By pooling resources, establishing interactive and consistent methods of idea sharing, working collectively to assess community needs, and launching professional development initiatives, network members are able to effectively and efficiently address constituent needs across state lines. Early success and sustainability of NCRAN can be largely attributed to four lessons learned: (a) visioning, (b) shared leadership, (c) connection, and (d) data-driven decision making. Other Extension professionals seeking to address constituent needs may find success in forming similar collaborative networks.

**Keywords:** [network](#), [collaboration](#), [aging](#), [vision](#), [sustainability](#)

**James S. Bates**  
Associate Professor  
and Extension Field  
Specialist  
The Ohio State  
University  
Columbus, Ohio  
[bates.402@osu.edu](mailto:bates.402@osu.edu)

**Jacquelyn J. Benson**  
Assistant Professor  
and State Specialist  
for Human  
Environmental  
Sciences Extension  
University of Missouri  
Columbia, Missouri  
[bensonjj@missouri.edu](mailto:bensonjj@missouri.edu)  
[u](#)

**Erin L. Yelland**  
Assistant Professor  
and Extension  
Specialist  
Kansas State  
University  
Manhattan, Kansas  
[erinyelland@ksu.edu](mailto:erinyelland@ksu.edu)

As an Extension professional not wanting to reinvent the wheel, have you wondered, "Does this resource already exist?" Extension professionals are committed to many of the same issues, but from county to county and state to state, we often use varying approaches and curricula to address similar constituent needs. One solution to improving and streamlining efforts is the deliberative and strategic formation of mutually beneficial multistate networks.

Numerous examples exist of successful Extension-based networks formed to address unmet regional needs and emerging societal trends and to streamline expertise and efforts (e.g., the North Central Region Water Network and the Extension Disaster Education Network; Koch, 1999). We and other family and consumer sciences Extension professionals established the North Central Region Aging Network (NCRAN) in 2016 to strengthen our ability to meet curricular and educational demands related to the topic of aging. By pooling resources, establishing interactive and consistent methods of idea sharing, working collectively to assess community needs, and launching outreach and professional development initiatives, we are better able to effectively and efficiently address needs across state lines. Herein, we detail the history of NCRAN and share

lessons learned that have contributed to the success and sustainability of the network.

## **Establishing and Sustaining NCRAN**

In April 2016, family and consumer sciences Extension specialists from the North Central Region gathered in Chicago to explore common programmatic interests and enhance professional networks. While there, a small group of eight specialists coalesced around the topic of aging and discussed aging-related curricular needs and gaps within Extension. All were in agreement that an increased emphasis on aging would benefit our constituents, stakeholders, and institutions and that by sharing resources, ideas, and expertise we would address needs more effectively than each of us could working alone. The group quickly committed to proceeding as a formalized network, NCRAN, to collaborate on aging-related educational and scholarly projects that would contribute to the Extension mission.

Two initial goals were identified: (a) create an online "toolkit" of aging-related programs and educational resources, and (b) conduct a region-wide needs assessment with Extension professionals to learn what aging-related topics are of greatest interest to local communities. The online toolkit was launched in 2019 ([www.ncran.org](http://www.ncran.org)) and includes resources, curricula, a blog, and twice-monthly webinars. We completed the needs assessment in 2017, capturing responses from 1,028 Extension professionals across the region. These results actively inform our work and have been presented at numerous conferences (Bates et al., 2017; Bates, Yelland, & Byers Gerstenecker, 2019; Yelland, Benson, Bates, Litzelman, & Stanfield, 2017), described in webinars (e.g., Yelland, Benson, & Byers Gerstenecker, 2018), and published in an academic journal (Yelland et al., 2019).

Since 2016, NCRAN has involved an additional four specialist-members and represents 11 of the 12 states in the North Central Region. Members are engaged in a diversity of research and outreach activities, garnering the attention of Extension professionals across the country and the U.S. Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture. NCRAN continues to make strides in more effectively and efficiently addressing aging-related issues, and in our view, the early success and sustainability of NCRAN can be largely attributed to four lessons learned: (a) visioning, (b) shared leadership, (c) connection, and (d) data-driven decision making.

### **Visioning**

Long-term impact and sustainability of the group is guided by our mission—to promote, support, and encourage activities that strengthen and advance evidence-informed practice on aging-related issues within Extension. The process of visioning and the resulting consequence of creating a mission statement, goals, objectives, and outcomes have served as motivators and justification for projects. In March 2018, NCRAN had a 2½-day retreat to engage in a formal visioning process, which included reviewing the group's previous accomplishments and developing a strategic plan outlining short- and long-term projects that would contribute to our vision. This retreat was crucial to establishing a group identity, creating bylaws, fostering a sense of solidarity among group members, and identifying projects that would elevate the impact and visibility of our work.

### **Shared Leadership**

Leadership in the network is shared and involves a rotating cochair model and standing committees. More informally, however, leadership is shared in the way we interact with one another—respecting each member as a peer and an expert in his or her own right. Although the network consists of members with a shared interest in gerontology, specific areas of expertise vary widely, as do positions as faculty, community educators, and/or researchers at our institutions. Recognizing the value of this diversity early in our group's formation was key to establishing a sense of interdependence among members, favoring teamwork in our visioning process, and accomplishing project outcomes. Consequently, our shared leadership group dynamics internally motivate group members to be accountable, supportive teammates who share responsibility for the group's success.

## Connection

Closely tied to the concept of shared leadership and what inevitably promotes a positive environment among members is a dedication to connecting as a group on a monthly basis in real time via live videoconferencing and intermittently in face-to-face meetings. Teamwork environments thrive on continued connection, and group members value the power of meeting regularly to discuss ideas, brainstorm solutions, and work on projects in real time versus via email communication (see Strieter & Blalock, 2006).

## Data-Driven Decision Making

Members' appreciation for data-driven decision making is another contributor to network success. With so much variation among members' expertise, brainstorming sessions unquestionably yield a fruitful list of options and exciting ideas for projects. Therefore, using empirical data to make informed decisions about which ideas to discard, suspend, or prioritize is crucial to maintaining team stability and honoring NCRAN's vision.

## Conclusion

Transforming a chance meeting of like-minded, enthusiastic Extension professionals into a formal network that supports aging-related programs and projects has taken several years and presented numerous learning opportunities. Each member of the network is committed to participating in continued visioning, sustaining respectful shared leadership, staying connected with each other, and relying on data to make decisions. We believe that similar cross-pollinations of personalities, expertise, passion, and strategic direction will lead any collaboration of Extension professionals toward success and sustainability.

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