The Journal of Extension

Volume 49 | Number 3 Article 25

6-1-2011

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Journal of Extension
www.joe.org

June 2011
Volume 49 Number 3
Article Number 3TOT3

Return to Current Issue

# Extension Through Partnerships: Research and Education Center Teams with County Extension to Deliver Programs.

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**Abstract:** Budget reductions have severely affected resources available to deliver agriculture and natural resource Extension programs in Florida. University of Florida/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences delivers Extension programming through a unique partnership between research and education centers and county Extension. Science-based information is shared between the research and education center and county Extension who have similar clientele or stakeholders and organizational missions. Extension agents disseminate cutting-edge research information generated by specialists at the center, and the specialists use county agent input to identify local and regional research problems.

## Introduction

Partnerships based on knowledge sharing between scientists and clientele groups are increasingly needed to advance science and for the implementation of science-based information (Born, Boreux, & Lawes, 2009). At land-grant universities, Extension serves as the bridge between research findings and their implementation or adoption by clientele groups. The strength of Extension and what keeps Extension relevant is the ability to listen to the people, focus on people's issues, develop science-based information for decision makers, and embrace accountability by measuring impacts (Smith, 2009). Successful Extension systems provide support to statewide and county Extension programs and encourage partnerships between these groups to deliver resources to the clientele. For example, the Family and Consumer Sciences Rapid Response Center (Kansas State University) consists of Extension specialists who support nearly 120 Family and Consumer Science Extension agents throughout the state by providing subject matter-based resources in a timely manner (Brannan & Gray, 1998). Successful Extension systems will require partnerships between the research and education specialists and county Extension agents to deliver science-based information in a timely manner to clientele groups.

## Objective of Partnership Between Research and Education Centers and County Extension

- Create and support Extension partnerships between faculty from research and education centers and county Extension that result in:

1. Increased Extension activities and Extension outreach to agricultural and natural resource land managers.

2. Improved Extension outcomes (gain in knowledge, change in behavior).

The University of Florida, West Florida Research and Education Center (WFREC) is located near Pensacola, Florida with the mission (teaching, research, Extension) of serving agriculture and natural resource land managers. The WFREC faculty partner with county Extension agents located in North West Florida to deliver Extension programs in agriculture (weed control, turf management, row crops, ornamental horticulture, specialty crops,) and natural resources (forestry, wildlife). Extension outreach occurs through activities such as field days, land manager meetings, demonstration plots, newsletters, workshops, and the Internet. County agent involvement includes service on planning and advisory committees, conducting field demonstrations, publishing reports, presenting information at Extension activities, evaluating program impacts, and providing input on future research and demonstration projects. This partnership is invaluable to the University of Florida, especially during periods of budget reductions that result in limited resources (operational and people) to conduct Extension programs.

# Developing the Partnership Between the Research and Education Center and County Extension

The partnership between the WFREC and county Extension was created to deliver science-based education that meets the needs of local and regional clientele. County Extension directors (five counties) recognized the science-based value of the WFREC and how this value could enhance the quality of information delivered through their Extension programs. The WFREC Center Director identified the benefits of county Extension for delivering high-impact Extension programs throughout NW Florida region. Working collaboratively, the administrative team (county directors and the center director), with assistance from clientele-based advisory groups, identified program areas in agriculture and natural resources that were similar for both county and WFREC Extension. This information anchored conversations regarding operational resources (land, facilities, people) needed for implementing the partnership.

## Partnership Delivers Extension Activities

By partnering with each other, faculty from the WFREC and county educators have conducted numerous Extension activities, including field days, field demonstrations, and clientele meetings and published newsletters, field reports, and Extension fact sheets (both print and electronic). Typically five to eight field days in agriculture (agribusiness, specialty crops, hydroponics, turfgrass, row crops, weed science) and natural resources (wildlife, forestry) are conducted annually, with attendance ranging from 50-400 people per event. The faculty work together on planning committees to develop the programs, identify topics and speakers, and conduct the event. This partnership has significantly increased outreach opportunities to agricultural and natural resource managers while reducing overall costs to Extension.

## Extension Program Outcomes and Impacts

Program evaluation should address the "input-output-outcome" model and have the goal to "improve" Extension (Rennekamp & Arnold, 2009). Surveys and pre- and post-tests, developed by the Extension team,

were given to all attendees from six field days in 2009 to measure impacts and outcomes. Surveys were analyzed using Survey Monkey, and the results were sent to the cooperating Extension faculty. In each field event, greater than 70% of the attendees completed a survey. The survey results identified areas for improving the events and facilities along with program outcomes/impacts (proof of effectiveness) such as gain in knowledge and changes in land management behavior (Table 1).

**Table 1.**
Survey Results From Six Field Events (2009) Conducted by Research and Education Center Faculty and Local County Extension

| **Event and Facilities** | **Response Excellent** | **Good** |
|---|---|---|
| 1. How would you rate the facility? | 54-80% | 20-36% |
| How would you rate the food? | 50-61% | 39-50% |
| How would you rate the event coordinator & staff? | 76-81% | 19-24% |
| How would you rate the audio and video equipment? | 41% | 48% |
| 2. Would you attend this event next year? | 92-97% | 3-7% |
| **Educational Program Impact** | **Yes** | **No** |
| 1. As a result of this program, do you plan to use the information/resources in your operation or business? | 50-90% | 10-50% |
| 2. Did you learn something new by attending the field day? | 95-100% | 0-5% |
| 3. Will you share the information you learned with other producers? | 100% | 0% |

Facilities and support staff involvement in Extension events are critical to success but are often over-looked. Our survey results showed the majority of responses rated the facility, food, and the event coordinator as "excellent" (Table 1). The excellent response for our facilities was surprising because we use outdoor tents during the summer season (heat, humidity, gnats). When asked if they would attend the event next year, over 90% of the responses were "yes," which demonstrates the value of the educational product to the clientele.

Regarding educational program impact, a majority of the responses indicated a gain in knowledge and indicated they would use the information from the program in their operation or business (Table 1). This data provides proof of effectiveness in that attendees indicated they will implement information from the event into their operations and share the information with other land managers. We need to develop a post field day survey instrument to use (6-12 months later) following these activities to ascertain the degree to which their knowledge increased and the degree to which that knowledge is applied. Survey results on impacts and outcomes were shared among the team and used for yearly evaluations and/or tenure and promotion documents.

# Conclusion

Partnerships between the research and education center and county Extension create opportunities for land-grant universities to share science-based knowledge with the public. County Extension agents enhanced their expertise and knowledge by partnering with center faculty, which improved Extension outreach in the counties. This partnership is especially important to universities during periods of reduced budgets because resources (people, operation costs) can be shared to meet educational goals.

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