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Creating a Place for Aging in the Cooperative Extension Service

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Creating a Place for Aging in the Cooperative Extension Service

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One of the most dramatic demographic shifts currently occurring in America is that of population aging (see Administration on Aging, 2016). Extension professionals have attempted for some time to focus attention on aging (Gerrior & Crocoll, 2008). However, because aging is complex, addressing the breadth of issues to the depth necessary is daunting. One solution to address that complexity is the strategic formation of a multistate network of Extension professionals. We detail here the formation of the North Central Region Aging Network (NCRAN) and share lessons learned that have contributed to the success and sustainability of the network; they include (a) visioning, (b) shared leadership, (c) connection, and (d) data-driven decision making.

At a regional meeting of family and consumer sciences Extension specialists in April of 2016, a small group of us coalesced around the topic of aging. We agreed that greater emphasis on aging would benefit our constituents, stakeholders, and institutions, and that by sharing resources, ideas, and expertise we could address needs more effectively than each of us could on our own. The group committed to forming a network, NCRAN, and began working to (a) create an online toolkit of aging-related resources (www.ncran.org), and (b) conduct a region-wide needs assessment of Extension professionals (Yelland et al., 2019).

Visioning

We have taken several opportunities to engage in visioning, which has been 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 is a shared endeavor that involves a rotating co-chair and standing committees. Each member is treated as a peer and an expert in their areas of specialization. Recognizing the group's diversity has helped establish interdependence in order to accomplish project outcomes.

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Connection

Network members are dedicated to connecting as a group regularly via live videoconferencing and intermittently in face-to-face meetings. Members value the power of meeting regularly to discuss ideas, brainstorm solutions, and work on projects.

Data-Driven Decision Making

Members rely on empirical data to make informed decisions about which projects to pursue. Data also aids us in determining which ideas to discard, suspend, or prioritize and helps us maintain focus on NCRAN's mission.

Conclusion

Network members are guided by our mission: to promote, support, and encourage activities that strengthen and advance evidence-informed practice on aging-related issues within Extension. Each member is committed to creating a place for aging in the Cooperative Extension Service.

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