

2-1-2006

## We Identified Issues Through Stakeholder Input--Now What?

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### Recommended Citation

Cummings, S. R., & Boleman, C. T. (2006). We Identified Issues Through Stakeholder Input--Now What?. *The Journal of Extension*, 44(1), Article 23. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol44/iss1/23>

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February 2006 // Volume 44 // Number 1 // Tools of the Trade // 1TOT1



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## We Identified Issues Through Stakeholder Input--Now What?

### Abstract

Listening to needs of clientele to maintain relevance is an essential component of planning. Extension has maintained relevance by listening to clientele. However, how can we systematically review all these issues and develop meaningful strategies to respond with impact? The answer to this question is our ability to maintain our grassroots advantage, but be accountable for regional and statewide impacts. This article provides a strategy to review issues that surface from clientele and develop programmatic action plans to address issues that surface from multiple sources for county, regional, and statewide implementation.

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## Background

The Texas Community Futures Forum (TCFF) is the centerpiece of the strategic planning process for Texas Cooperative Extension. TCFF is Texas Extension's mechanism to listen to the people described by Boleman and Cummings (2005). It is important to note that TCFF is not the only source of needs assessment data collected by Texas Cooperative Extension. Identifying these other sources and utilizing their needs with needs identified through TCFF are the focus of this article.

## Sources of Information

Extension utilizes numerous sources of stakeholder input in order to identify relevant issues and actions to address these issues. These sources include commodity or special interest groups, county committees, elected officials, state and national trends or mandates, base programming, and issues identified by specialists. Other sources of information on relevant issues are identified as they arise. These "emerging" issues are typically not known during the planning process but are typically integral parts of the action process. It is important to understand this because these are all valid, reliable sources for issues. The key is to study the issues that surface from these different areas, allowing the educational programmer to determine the significance of the issue, resources that are available to address the issue, and determine the issues that need significant educational programming in order to address the issues. More information concerning stakeholder input is noted below.

### Commodity/Industry Groups

Extension shares rich tradition and strong bonds with many other organizational groups. Roundtable discussions frequently happen with stakeholders and leaders of commodity/industry groups. In addition, these groups and Extension share the same or similar groups of people who utilize our services. Some of the most recognized programs in Extension are partnerships and

collaborations with commodity, industry, or subject matter-specific groups.

## County Committees

Grassroots involvement has helped Extension maintain relevance with clientele for many decades. In order for us to be most efficient at developing and implementing quality educational programs, it is imperative that we partner with our community leaders in the areas of Agricultural and Natural Resources, Family and Consumer Sciences, 4-H and Youth Development, and Community & Economic Development.

## Elected Officials

As a result of Extension being funded by federal, state, and counties, it is imperative that we listen closely to our elected officials and include them in our strategic planning process. The ideas that surface from their constituents are another way local issues are presented and need to be addressed.

## State and Federal Trends or Mandates

As a direct result of funding priorities, sometimes federal and state monies are provided to help address an issue.

## Base Programs

Base programs of Agricultural & Natural Resources, Family & Consumer Sciences, 4-H & Youth Development, and Community and Economic Development are the foundation of Extension. Most programs developed on issues fall into one or a combination of these program areas. These areas are where our subject matter competency falls.

## Specialists

Extension specialists bring issues that have surfaced through their association meetings and communication with colleagues. Also, they typically are most equipped to forecast emerging issues and work closely with commodity/industries and bring their ideas to the forefront as well.

## Emerging Issues

Issues can change daily. This is the curve ball of our work. Sometimes Mother Nature can change the focus of our Agricultural and Natural Resource program priorities over night. As an agency of change, we have to be sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of our counties and change the direction of our programming if needed.

## Bringing All These Together--Data Summits

One challenge Extension has faced over the last several years is how to bring all the information collected from various stakeholders together in order to develop a more unified approach. As this state conducted the inaugural TCFF process in 1999, we were faced with a perception that this was the sole source of data for which we were to build our educational programming.

As the agency prepared for and implemented the TCFF process in 2004, we added a component to bring issues from other groups to the table with the issues identified in TCFF. This was the primary purpose of the Regional Data Summits. A secondary purpose was to bring together Extension faculty at all levels to discuss issues and begin developing program plans from TCFF and these other sources. Specific objectives of the data summits are outlined below:

- Bring all issues to the table from identified stakeholders;
- Determine similar issues emerging from multiple sources;
- Develop work groups to begin planning to address issues;
- Develop resources that can help address and support programming concerning issues; and
- Draft action plans for priority issues.

Table 1 provides steps to develop programmatic priorities based on stakeholder and Extension faculty input.

**Table 1.**  
Steps to Prioritize Issues from Multiple Planning Processes

<b>Step 1. Identify the Issues</b>						
TCFF	Industry Groups	County Committees	State and Federal	Base Programs	Specialists	Emerging Issues

## **Step 2. Find the Overlap**

The Regional Data Summits were designed to bring all levels of Extension faculty together to evaluate issues from these different sources. Priority was given to issues revealed in multiple groups.

## **Step 3. Develop Work Groups to Begin Planning to Address Issues**

After these priority issues were identified, county Extension agents and subject matter specialists were placed into working teams because of their expertise and interest in the individual issue.

## **Step 4. Develop Resources to Help Address and Support Programming Concerning Issues**

These individual teams then looked at current resources that could support the issue. In addition, these teams were then asked to provide other resources that need to be developed to further address the issue.

## **Step 5. Draft Action Plans for Priority Issues**

After resource development, the team planned steps to address individual issues using worksheets provided for the development of goals, objectives, and educational strategies to address the issue

## **Step 6. Review All Priority Issues to Determine Statewide/Regional Initiatives**

After all the regional data summits, administrators, mid-managers, and educational programming specialists reviewed all action plans to develop statewide initiatives.

During the summer of 2004, 12 separate regionally based data summits were held. From these summits, over 100 actions plans were developed. Some of these plans addressed issues of statewide importance, while others addressed issues that were more regionally or locally focused. More important, these action plans have served as models for county Extension agents and specialists to develop their respective plans of work and have served as the framework for the development of the agency strategic plan.

## **Conclusion**

Why were the Data Summits important? The TCFF process and other sources of needs assessment data yielded all types of issues facing Texans. The data summits provided an opportunity to involve all levels of Extension faculty. Common issues and common responses were identified. These summits allowed faculty to communicate with each other on how to most effectively address issues, to develop issue responses, and to identify resources to address issues.

## **Reference**

Boleman, C. T., & Cummings, S. R. (2005). Listening to the people--A strategic planning model for Cooperative Extension. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 43(3) Article 3TOT3. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2005june/tt3.shtml>

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