

## EXTENSION ACCOUNTABILITY--A FEDERAL PERSPECTIVE

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Most of the people who work with extension in the counties and states would agree that it does good work. It even appears that folks in Washington, including members of Congress, tend to feel that way, too. So, why is there this constant call for increased and improved accountability by extension? The current environment in Washington—when you combine the National Research Council reports on the land grant universities, the tight budget atmosphere, and the changes in political representation shifting toward urban and suburban interests—leads to greater pressure for extension to not only document the good work it does, but to demonstrate that it is the best work that can be done using federal dollars.

For those in the field or living in the local community, the activities and benefits of extension activities are far more visible. However, in Washington, it is very hard to describe exactly what programs and outcomes federal contributions to extension are accomplishing.

A special task force was recently assembled by the secretary of agriculture to examine the farm safety net. The focus was on risk management. Regarding the education component, it was found that there was no way to effectively describe such basic summary indicators as the total value of extension funds or staff resources dedicated to risk management education currently. To develop a program for comprehensive risk management education and to cost it out, it was necessary to rely on a couple of specific activities in certain states to estimate resource needs and costs. It was not possible to describe the extent and cost of current programs or how a new program would mesh with existing

programs. This represents a significant handicap these days in Washington.

With budget monies tight, it is very difficult to enter into program funding negotiations without good supporting data on resource availability and cost. One could call individual states and get some estimates, but it is nearly impossible to add up efforts across states and to make sense of the data. Frankly, discussions with some state program leaders clearly reveal that many states would have trouble summarizing their own resource allocations to various programs.

The inability to say with some precision exactly how extension funds are being used is only one side of the issue. The other side is evaluating how effective the programs are at meeting societies needs. Eventually, it must be demonstrated to the folks providing the funding that extension funds are highly effective compared to other uses of the money.

Congress recently passed the Agricultural Research, Extension and Education Reauthorization Act of 1998 (P.L. 105-185) that legislates attempts to improve accountability extension (and research and education) activities. Congress mandated two main areas to address this issue—improved and validated stakeholder processes, and a plan of work reporting system that ties in with federal goals and requires federal approval.

Soliciting stakeholder input is designed to ensure that extension programs are developed using a broad set of input drawn from a diverse set of individuals and

organizations. The goal appears to be to increase relevance through greater stakeholder influence in program design. Another way to ensure accountability is to require states to submit a plan of work that links programs funded with federal dollars to federal goals, and to also require federal approval of that plan prior to releasing formula funds.

Both of these methods focus on *ex ante* influence on the relevance of state extension programs. They may improve Congress' sense that federal extension funds are being used for relevant programs, but these methods do not provide for *ex post* assessment. This means that extension, and its federal partner, the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, will still need to develop ways to measure the distribution of funds across programs and the effectiveness of those programs in attaining the prescribed goals.

These efforts are likely to require the development of a consistent data base on program expenditures across states, and a scientific evaluation program that allows extension to say how well, on average, federally-funded extension programs perform in attaining their prescribed goals. Thus, the real work of accountability in the extension system still remains to be formulated.

## References

- National Research Council. *Colleges of Agriculture at the Land Grant Universities: A Profile*. Washington DC: National Academy Press, 1995.
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