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So What?: A Primer on Methods for Identifying, Measuring, and Analyzing Program Outcomes and Impacts*

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ABSTRACT This paper offers insights on the need for increased program accountability and the benefits that arise from the use of better performance measures. Examples of impact and accountability reports are presented to highlight the best practices. Weaker impact reports are analyzed so as to emphasize more effective ways to demonstrate outputs and impact to funders.

Demonstrating Our Impact and 1890 Accountability

There is an increasing need for accountability for all publicly funded programs. Specific to the Cooperative Extension, evidence can be found in the Narrative Annual Report of Accomplishments guidance and approval letters of the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension (CSREES). In recent years, our federal partners have been adamant that states do a better job in reporting the measurable outcomes and impacts associated with expenditure of taxpayer

* Please note that the quotes in this article were taken from “Doing Business with CSREES, State Plans of Work Annual Reports including AREERA” section of the USDA CSREES website. Other examples are taken from the FY 2000 Annual Report and may also be found on the USDA CSREES website:

<http://www.csrees.usda.gov/business/reporting/planrept/examples.html>
<http://www.csrees.usda.gov/business/reporting/planrept/examples.html>

dollars. Federal agencies have further cautioned states to include program reports with actual impact data.

Until recently, we were content with reports that cited outputs and numbers of program participants to the exclusion of reports that focused on measurable outcomes and impacts. There are numerous examples reporting X number of farmers attending a demonstration or training, X number of homemakers receiving subject matter training, or X number of 4-H youth attending workshops. Rarely did we address the outcomes of such training.

That scenario will no longer suffice. Increasing competition for dollars and program responsibility lends credence to the fact that our agencies must do a better job documenting the impacts of our programs and activities. We may no longer simply state what we did but instead must detail the outputs and outcomes of our programs by effectively documenting how our programs have positively impacted the lives of participants.

Continuation of funding for public programs is directly related to how well we are able to document the impacts of our programs. Alabama, like many other states, is now imposing performance based budgeting for public agencies. Agencies that once took their state appropriations as a given are now faced with having to provide a concise set of indicators of program success and are then held accountable for their attainment. Outputs, while important in the overall program development process, are not measures of program success. The mere citation of number of publications produced, attendees, contacts, and meetings or demonstrations conducted will simply not suffice. Nor will testimonials alone provide the needed evidence for continuation of funding. Our agencies must be able to prove that the continued expenditure of public funds is warranted, based on quantitative as well as qualitative assessments of the positive impacts derived. Success stories remain a valuable part of the accountability process, but only to the degree to which they complement and exemplify what is proven by objective, quantitative measures of success.

Today, those who authorize and administer funding to public agencies demand data on the impacts of programs. They want to know how their investment has contributed to quantifiable changes in social, economic, and environmental conditions, improved community function and structure, and significantly

enhanced individual and family well-being. Research and Extension programs at Auburn University, along with many other land-grant institutions, recently underwent an in-depth audit by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Office of the Inspector General. The resulting report is sobering at best. The Office of the Inspector General's audit report is evidence that critical eyes are monitoring our programs for compliance with the law and how well agencies are able to document the measurable impacts of programs. Funders seek the answer to but one very simple question—"So what?" In other words, they are not interested in the fact that 100 farmers were present at a meeting. They want to know how the economic conditions of 100 farmers were improved by their attendance at the meeting. It is necessary to provide creditable proof of our program outcomes and impacts in order to ensure the existence of future initiatives.

Benefits of Increased Accountability

There are important reasons for public agencies to seek accountability for our programs. When properly designed and implemented, accountability and evaluation allows public agencies to:

- Assess the performance of, and improve public agency programs and activities.
- Develop best strategies and increase program efficiency.
- Generate objective, quantitative evidence of program impact and outcomes.
- More efficiently expend the human and fiscal resources of public agencies.
- Better assess which programs to keep in public agencies' inventories and which programs to discontinue (a process that is very difficult for most agencies).
- Improve program visibility internally and externally.
- Help the public better comprehend our programs and their value to individuals and the community.

Who Wants to Know? Audiences for Impact and Accountability Information

Different parties seek greater accountability and evaluation data associated with expenditure of public funds. They want to know how we expend dollars, but are even more interested in the tangibles (positive outputs and outcomes) produced by such expenditures. This is especially true with regard to elected officials, who share our audience. Sources of requests for information on the impacts and outcomes of public agencies programs include:

- Federal partner (e.g., CREES).
- Congress (e.g., OMB, OIG).
- State, county, and local governments.
- Public agency directors and administrators.
- Commodity groups, special interest groups, watchdogs, advisory groups.
- Public agency communication, program planning, and evaluation staff.
- Public agency personnel responsible for conducting performance appraisals.
- Peers within agency, and in related public agencies across the nation.
- External funding sources, both public and private.

Common Attributes of Audiences for Accountability and Impact Information.

To varying degrees, those demanding increased accountability and impact information from public agencies directly or indirectly exercise some control over programs. Their time is usually limited and they have multiple competitors for their attention. They only have time to read information that is vital to their decision-making process or information that is directly related to their target audiences and stakeholders.

The Extension Narrative Annual Report of Accomplishments is an exception in that it seeks documented

impacts and outcomes but also continues to relish receipt of qualitative information, such as success stories, that highlight program impacts on selected individuals or communities. In the past federal partners often wanted all program information but recently the focus has shifted. Today, our federal partner has an almost singular interest in reports that contain documented accountability and impact data.

Those who seek hard evidence of program outcomes and impacts are looking for information that justifies their fiscal investment in a given agency program or activity. Reporting that a program is successful via anecdotal evidence or public testimonial is inadequate. In the highly competitive environment in which we operate today, "feel good" programs are coming under increasing scrutiny. The immensely popular law enforcement DARE program is a good example. While it remains politically incorrect to criticize such popular programs, fiscal realities negate the expectation that such programs can continue to persist in the absence of conclusive data to validate claims of success.

How We Use Impact and Accountability Information

I am often asked by county agents and specialists why we ask them for certain information. We often deluge our staff with information requests without providing them any explanation of why the information is important and what we do with it. There are several concrete examples of how data is used. For example, some of the uses for requested accountability information include:

- Annual reports of accomplishments and unit/base program reports are often required for continued funding.
- Annual reports that inform internal and external audiences about your agency and the positive impacts its programs have on individuals and communities.
- Special reports, as requested from CSREES, state government, and the like are often needed to inform and convince executive and legislative entities to continue to include the agency as a line item in the budget.
- Unit reports (base program area reports).

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- Reports to county and local governments are particularly useful given that such funding far exceeds federal allocations to the agency.
- Public relations materials that keep our publics and stakeholders up to date on agency activities.
- Performance appraisals greatly assists the individual in preparing for an evaluation.
- Information requests (on specific programs) from other states is important as there is no need to reinvent what has already been proven to work.
- The previously discussed program planning and evaluation functions.

Impact Statement Checklists

There are common formats for impact statements. Like the impact statement checklist outlined below, these formats are useful, but they can be significantly improved. Here, I examine the components of a sample impact statement checklist, while offering suggestions for improvement in light of the necessity to demonstrate impact and outputs.

Impact report title. Be certain the title of the program or activity succinctly captures the essence of the program. It is all too common to find project titles with extravagant and wordy titles that do little to inform the reader about the program. Time is critical and it is essential that the program title immediately convey to the reader what the activity is yet also persuades them to peruse the report.

Issue statement. The issue statement must immediately define the problem for the reader. It must convey why the program constitutes a significant endeavor. The issue statement must define the audience and answer the question: Why is this important? It is essential that we not overlook the great importance of the audience—the “Who cares?” aspect of the report and the explanation of why the issue, and associated activities, are important to the audience. It is entirely possible that we (public agencies) have identified a problematic issue with the best intentions. But if the target audience does not share our definition it will be difficult at best to convince others (our administration, funding agencies,

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cooperators, for example) that our program has merit. We must also remain cognizant of the concept of a shared audience, that is, the target audience we define as associated with a given issue may also be the audience of other public agencies, as well as local, state, and federal elected officials. They may also want to monitor our program outcomes and impacts.

In our issue statements we must also succinctly indicate the intended outcomes and expected impacts of the program. Specific to Cooperative Extension, we must be able to express what it is that we predict extension program efforts to do to resolve the problem.

Accomplishments. As CSREES reminds our institutions, we must detail what has been done to address the issue and who was most affected by the program. It is necessary that our accomplishment reports define the resources used in support of the activity and that we outline the outputs (e.g., publications, meetings, newsletters, handbooks, brochures, TV and radio ads, demonstrations) used to convey our educational message. But we cannot expect that a list of outputs will be enough to ensure program continuation. Not only must we define the resources and outputs, but we must also devote the majority of our discussion to the achievement of program outcomes and impacts.

Impacts. This answers the question "So what?" We must ensure that the reader has no difficulty understanding the positive impacts generated by our programs and activities. We need to define the outcomes, detail how we met our stated objectives. We should have ample quantitative and qualitative data to support our claim of success. It is absolutely essential that our impact statements define the positive difference the program made in people's lives. The statements must define the economic gains or improved efficiency, environmental quality enhancements, or other positive changes that occurred in the community resulting from the expenditure of public funds. As mentioned earlier, if we cannot provide a clear and concise answer to the question "So what?" then our chances of program continuation are low.

Partners. Today, it is almost a given that our programs and activities will include interagency collaborations and program partners. Most funding agencies expect this. Specific to Cooperative Extension (but also true of other agencies) we have an excellent history of engaging in successful collaborative agreements and

partnerships. However, even though this history is strong, Extension staff have a very poor record of ensuring that they are afforded public credit for their role in the program success. All too often we do the majority of the work and our partner takes the credit. Cooperative Extension and other public agencies must improve the public visibility for our own contributions to program success.

Prioritize affiliation. What national, regional, state, or local priorities are associated with this program? Linking programs to similar efforts on the state, regional, national, or international level may lend greater creditability to a proposed program or for continuation of an existing program. This is particularly useful when we demonstrate a need and also demonstrate that similar efforts have generated positive outcomes and impacts in similar contexts.

Program contacts. For further information on the program, determine who should be contacted and how to reach them. Assuming we have done a good job with our impact statements and captured the interest of the reader, it must be easy for the reader to seek additional information about the program. A fault I often observe is that the designated contact is someone other than the person(s) who can provide firsthand program details. All too often the contact cited is the program director or administrator instead of the principals involved. The contact should be person(s) most actively involved in and most conversant about the program.

Impact Reports: Best Practices

With these general characteristics of the components of an impact report, it is useful to look at some examples of effective impact reports and some that are not. The following examples were pulled directly from Annual Reports of Accomplishments and Results as submitted to CSREES. See the USDA-CSREES website for additional examples (<http://www.csrees.usda.gov/business/reporting/planrept/examples.html>).

The three examples that follow serve as best practices for writing impact reports. Their strengths are similar: there is a clear problem statement, a reachable goal to achieve, partners and their

role in the project are described, a progression through outputs is described, and outcomes and impacts are clearly documented.

Example One: Rural Housing Lot Improved.

Rural areas such as Greene and Hale counties continue to bear a large percentage of inadequate housing. Tuskegee University partnered with the USDA Rural Development office to assist families and individuals to improve or acquire new homes. Potential homeowners were identified and assisted with the completion of all forms necessary to apply for a Rural Development loan or grant program. Training in home management, household budgeting, dwelling maintenance, credit and debt management and other areas were provided to assist individuals in becoming successful homeowners or recipients of home repair funds and grants. Twenty-six applicants were assisted. Nine of the 22 participants have already received financial assistance. During the year, three elderly families obtained a 504 grant in the amount of \$7,500 per family. Four families obtained 502 loans in the amount of 20,000 per family for home repairs. One family was able to become a first time homeowner with a loan of \$78,000.

Example Two: North Carolina Extension

Thirty-four counties reported that they conducted programs to increase individuals' and families' knowledge of and ability to implement financial planning techniques, and to adopt best management practices that would enable them to meet their changing needs and responsibilities over their life cycle. These 34 counties also reported that they focused programming efforts toward the limited resource individual and family audience. These efforts were intended to increase their awareness and knowledge of money management practices, to change

Twenty counties reported that their efforts to educate individuals and families about the benefits of best management financial practices, and the techniques of how to implement these practices to extend and increase their current income reached 4891 people and resulted in 1945 persons actually extending their income by over \$175,200. There was also 1093 individuals who demonstrated appropriate decisions making regarding their employment situation and increased their income by an estimated \$365,411. Another 641 individuals indicated that they improved their self-employment situation after participating in these educational efforts by an estimated \$64,558.

Example Three: Alabama Combined Extension

Beef cattle production is the major source of income for most limited resource farm families in the Alabama Black Belt counties. Traditionally, limited resource beef producers have marketed lightweight calves that have poor carcass quality. These calves took too long to reach the desirable market weight to earn reasonably good prices and profits. The Tuskegee University Cooperative Extension program with assistance from the Natural Resource Conservation Service conducted intensive beef cattle workshops and clinics, concentrating on upgrading herds with performance tested bulls and improving nutritional programs. Health management, parasite control, and pasture and hayfield renovation were also emphasized and demonstrated. During the year, four producers in Dallas and Perry Counties reduced fertilizer applications by incorporating legume crops in grazing pastures and hayfields. Twenty-two producers in these counties and in Lowndes and Wilcox counties increased weaning weights, some on an average by 142 pounds and market weights by 208 pounds, thereby, increasing their income by \$135.05 per calf. One producer started

his own pasture feedlot operation to increase production of beef in a shorter time period.

These three best practices are effective not only in describing what the problem is, but also in clearly outlining the course of action taken and, most importantly, how the approach positively impacted program participants. Each makes clear that past program funding was well invested and makes a compelling case for additional assistance. Potential donors should feel confident that program planners and administrators are capable of affecting change and documenting their impact.

Impact Reports: Examples Needing Improvement

It is also useful to take a brief look at weaker impact report characteristics in order to provide real examples along with some suggestions of how they can be improved. The primary criticism of most is that they are focused on program or activity outputs to the exclusion of outcomes and impacts. As CSREES has well stated: “Outputs without impact do nothing to help us justify funding of programs and projects.” In other words, these reports fail to adequately answer the question, “So what?” In addition, some of the examples are from reports with projects that are not sufficiently mature to show positive outcomes and impacts. Still others beg the definition of “report” and are presented much like a plan instead of an assertion of accomplishments.¹

Weaker reports describe activity outputs; for instance, at a conference, “over 200 horticulturists were updated on the latest information concerning landscape plant care and appropriate plant materials.” Similarly, in a course, “70 new applicators were trained...for their licenses.” Another report asserts that “659 leaders were trained in leadership and development of community projects, and 145 community projects were developed and established.”

¹ Excerpts are from various Annual Reports of Accomplishments. To retain anonymity, no specifics are included to identify the university.

For additional examples, please see:

<http://www.csrees.usda.gov/business/reporting/planrept/examples.html>.

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Though these activities show promise, impact and outcomes are largely ignored and potential donors are not presented with tangible outcomes. They cannot tell how program participants changed from their attendance. In order to make these reports more convincing, they should address what the participants do with the information presented. The following example is problematic for a different reason:

Research results will allow scientists to devise methods to extend postproduction quality of flowering crops without the use of synthetic chemicals; will lead to more efficient use of greenhouse-applied fertilizers, minimization of nutrient runoff, and increase in crop water use efficiency; will minimize leaching of nitrate into groundwater supplies; and allow fast-growing trees to serve as a low-input, natural wastewater purification system for economically disenfranchised communities along the border.

This is an example of a program that lacks maturity. It is better to delay reporting on immature programs until there are documented outcomes and impacts. Similarly, the following list of activities is not convincing because it is presented as a plan rather than a report. Potential impacts are not actual outcomes or impacts.

- Approximately 28 master gardener classes will be presented approximately 7 per year as requested by county agents. Approximately 24 pesticide applicator training workshops will be presented.
- Approximately 96 newsletter and magazine articles will be written.
- Approximately 16 extension publications will be written.
- Approximately 8 TV spots, 40 radio spots, and 48 news releases will be disseminated.

In my thirty-year tenure with Cooperative Extension I have personally witnessed our evolution from the very loose, generally output only, reporting protocols to the current era of ever increasing scrutiny of the impacts and outcomes of programs. In today's climate we are faced with rigorous competition, by both public and

private entities for program dollars we once assumed to be an entitlement. Our competitors constantly position themselves to suggest that they could do a better job—that is, produce greater and more significant program outcomes—if afforded the opportunity. The question, ‘So what?’ is increasingly significant and will continue to be so. If our agencies are to remain leaders in the provision of educational services to our publics we must enhance our capacity to document significant positive program outcomes and impacts to individuals, families, communities, and our environment. Accountability and evaluation are essential components to be included at the inception of the program planning process. We must have a clear, concise, and realistic vision of program outcome and impacts, and agency capacity to generate them prior to program design and initiation. Measures of program success must not be relegated to the status of afterthought and if we fail to recognize this our efforts in community and economic development will be severely compromised.