

Priority Setting

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Just as it is important for the County Extension Council to link Cooperative Extension programming efforts to needs identification and situation analysis, it is equally important for the council to be involved in deciding which needs and issues will be addressed. At this point, the County Extension Council members, program leaders, and staff have been engaged in gathering information and data related to the county and the needs and wants of local citizens. Agents have worked with University faculty in identifying research, legislation, and policies which have implications for programming. Council members and agents have gathered information about the county from citizens and existing data sources.

Now the question becomes, “What do we do with all this information?” How do we share the data with the council? There are many more needs identified and program opportunities than can be addressed, so prioritization is essential.

This fact sheet will provide ideas for presenting data to the County Extension Council and describe tools which can be used in setting priorities.

PRESENTING THE DATA

Both the County Extension Agents and members of the County Extension Council should be involved in gathering data to provide an accurate picture of the county and its relationship to counties of similar population and demographic characteristics. Providing information which shows rankings within the state and nation helps clarify the needs and issues locally.

All information gathered should be presented in an unbiased, straightforward and accurate manner. Individuals selected to present data should try to avoid letting personal biases, values, and beliefs interfere with presenting an accurate picture of the county. Even when such biases are present, a County Extension Council that reflects diversity in the backgrounds and experiences of its members helps assure a balanced interpretation of the local situation.

Charts and Graphs:

Pictures can tell a story. For many, the graphic presentation of numbers will more clearly communicate a need or issue. Use computer programs such as, Microsoft Excel, SPSS, or other software programs, to develop charts and graphs which make the data more easily understood. These may be presented in several ways: using a computer program such as PowerPoint, creating an actual poster with graphs and charts, or printing and distributing handouts with graphs and charts.

Meet with County Extension Council members who have gathered data from various sources and decide how the data could be presented most effectively. If necessary the Extension office may need to produce the charts and graphs from the data provided by the Council members.

Quiz Formats:

Simple multiple-choice or true-false questions can also be used as teaching tools. If you write the questions and use related information as the alternatives in multiple-choice questions, it will provide a guide for presenting the data and making it more relevant. For example:

What percent of the families in our county are below the poverty level?

A. 12%

B. 16%

C. 17%

D. 23%

Answer: For this county the correct answer is "C." Alternative "A" represents the US poverty level; "B" represents the State; and, "D" represents a neighboring county.

Thus, a discussion of the all alternatives would provide a clearer picture of the ranking of this county with respect to related entities.

Game Formats:

We have all played *Trivial Pursuit* or *Jeopardy* and learned a lot in the process. By creating your own game, based on a television show or a commercial game, you can share data and also have fun in the process. Other games which work well are *Hollywood Squares* (Tic Tac Toe) or *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*

Dividing the participants into groups and letting them identify answers creates a more supportive environment where individuals participate as teams. Having simple, inexpensive prizes for winning teams can add to the fun for everyone.

MOVING FROM RAW DATA TO PROGRAM OPPORTUNITIES

The next logical question is, "What does all this data mean?" Now the task is to move from raw data to a meaningful grouping of needs and issues. In many ways,

gathering data is the easy part. Putting it in a context and giving a name to the issues and needs of the county is more difficult and challenging.

The process of identifying program opportunities begins with the County Extension Council identifying the local needs and opportunities for programs based on the data presented and accompanying discussions. (See Figure 1) Once the list of needs and program opportunities has been generated, priorities must be set to provide parameters for a meaningful yet doable plan which focuses on major program thrusts. Criteria established by the CEC and Extension staff will guide the decision-making process.

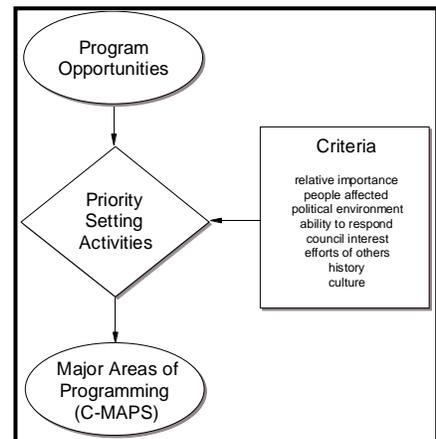


Figure 1: Linking Program Opportunities to MAPs

Brainstorming

The most frequently used technique for generating a list of ideas is *Brainstorming*. (For more information see *Brainstorming* fact sheet: <http://www.ca.uky.edu/agpsd/brainsto.pdf>) Because the County Extension Council is “armed” with information collected through the situation analysis, brainstorming is likely to produce a highly relevant list of program ideas. Facilitated correctly, brainstorming will involve all members of the group, even those reluctant to speak at public meetings.

Guidelines for Conducting the Brainstorming Activity

- 1. Clearly frame an open-ended question.** For example, *From the data which has been presented to the Council, what are the educational needs for this county?*
- 2. Do not censure or make judgments about any ideas.** The goal is to generate as many ideas as possible. Do not comment on any ideas at this time.
- 3. List all ideas generated on a flip chart.** Have one or two persons writing ideas as quickly as they are shared. (Tip: When the page is three-fourths full, start a new page. It encourages the group to continue generating ideas.)
- 4. Encourage hitchhiking.** Encourage people to add ideas that build or are generated by someone else’s suggestions.
- 5. Focus on quantity.** The more ideas generated the better. Often the best suggestions come in the last few minutes of a brainstorming activity.
- 6. Stay loose.** Keep the environment free and supportive. Do not force people to participate.

In large groups it is often difficult to get everyone present to speak out or share their thoughts with others. The following modification of the brainstorming activity will create a smaller and more supportive environment which will solicit input from all participants.

Modified Brainstorming Activity Utilizing Small Groups

- 1. Divide the participants into small groups.** Groups of 5-7 are optimal.
- 2. Begin with silent generation of ideas.** Individuals first work independently to generate their own list of program ideas. The facilitator instructs them to write the three ideas they feel most strongly about on half-sheets of paper (5 ½ X 8 ½) using a felt-tip marking pen. Use a separate sheet of paper for each idea.
- 3. Share ideas.** Each individual shares one idea with the small group in round-robin fashion until all ideas are shared.
- 4. Discuss and clarify.** Within the small group, discuss and clarify all ideas, allowing participants to explain further the idea they shared. Remove duplications and cluster related ideas under a new heading.
- 5. Select ideas to share with larger group.** Each small group selects three or four ideas that all members of the small group can support as programming priorities.
- 6. Present ideas to larger group.** Ideas from small groups are presented in round-robin fashion to the larger group. Groups place their ideas (the original sheet of paper the idea was written on or the new heading for clustered ideas) on a “sticky wall.” (The “sticky wall” is a sheet of nylon fabric approximately 4’ wide by 8’ long that has been sprayed with adhesive. Paper will then adhere to the fabric, but can be removed or moved with ease. Instead of nylon, rolled paper of similar dimensions may be used.)
- 7. Ideas are discussed and clarified within the larger group.** Duplications are removed. Related ideas can be clustered under a new heading and treated as a single programming thrust. What remains is a list of program opportunities derived from the collective wisdom of the group.

The resulting list comprises locally identified needs or issues we call Program Opportunities (See Figure 1.) However, this list is generally quite long and may have many more program ideas than the county can address at this time. Program priorities must be set to realistically lead to a significant impact. The selection of program priorities is guided by criteria.

CRITERIA

The process of setting priorities begins with the examination of each identified need in light of a set of criteria that helps to determine either the magnitude of the issue or the prospects for making a difference with the issue. Some of the ideas generated from the brainstorming activity may be more relevant to Extension's educational mission than others. Thus, criteria must be developed to serve as a guide for setting priorities.

These criteria can include:

- # The relative importance of the issue.
- # The number of people affected.
- # Political environment.
- # History, i.e., Has this been addressed in the past? Are there implications from other programs?
- # Ability of Extension to respond.
- # Interests of County Extension Council members.
- # Culture of the county and communities.
- # Efforts of other organizations and agencies.

In light of these criteria, some programming opportunities are more compelling than others. When individual council members apply the criteria, they will not come to the same conclusions regarding the priority of program ideas. Fortunately, there are several methods which can be used to set priorities that still allow every voice to be heard as the group makes decisions regarding high priority programming opportunities.

SETTING PRIORITIES

Since we can't do everything, it is important to engage in a process to determine the program opportunities which are the highest priorities for your county. With the criteria in mind the group engages in a process for determining program priorities they feel Extension should focus on during the next four years. Once decided, they become County Major Areas of Programming (C-MAPS). (See Figure 1.)

By design *Brainstorming* generates a long list of ideas. Even after applying the criteria there are more program opportunities than can be addressed in one plan of work. Several methods of voting are described below which help groups narrow long lists into a prioritized grouping that guide the development of C-MAPS.

Simple Voting – Each member votes for the one item on the list they feel is the highest priority. After everyone has voted the votes are counted and the items with the most votes are designated as highest priority.

Multi-Voting – In this activity participants are allowed to vote for as many items as they wish. They may vote using a show of hands or colored dots or stars. Votes for each item are totaled and all items receiving votes from half the people voting are included in the next round. (Example: If 20 people vote, items receiving 10 votes are in the next round.) Everyone votes again. Each person is allowed to cast votes equal to half the number of items on the list. Repeat until there are six to ten items on the list. Discuss remaining ideas and selecting top priorities. (For more information see, *Multivoting* fact sheet: <http://www.ca.uky.edu/agpsd/multivot.pdf>)

100 Votes – Sometimes called *Weighted Voting*, each participant is given the opportunity to cast multiple votes, in this activity it is 100 votes. The participants allocate their votes to the items they feel should have the highest priority. For example, there may be 5 items they feel are priorities. They then write the number of votes beside the items, i.e., 35 beside the two they feel strongest about and 10 beside the other three or some other combination totaling 100 votes. If they wish they may cast all 100 votes for one program idea. All votes are totaled and the group discusses the items and ranking determined by the voting. Group determines the cut off for priority programs. (For more information see, *100 Votes* fact sheet: <http://www.ca.uky.edu/agpsd/100votes.pdf>)

Nominal Group Technique¹ - This technique begins with silent brainstorming to generate program ideas. In round-robin fashion, each participant shares an idea until their list is depleted. Discuss all ideas. Share pros and cons. Similar ideas are grouped. Each member is then asked to rank order their top ten ideas, with ten being the highest ranking. This may be done directly on the flip chart sheet listing the ideas or on a 3 X 5 card. Rankings are totaled and ideas are ranked with the one receiving the highest total being the highest ranked. You may want to record the number of people who ranked each of the items. Discuss rankings and determine program priorities. (For more information see, *Nominal Group Technique* fact sheet: <http://www.ca.uky.edu/agpsd/nominal.pdf>)

COUNTY “MAJOR AREAS OF PROGRAMMING”

Once the priorities have been established, the Extension staff will have directions regarding the focus of future Extension programs. These high priority program thrusts are referred to as **Major Areas of Programming** or **MAPs**. Each county is expected to identify between five and eight MAPs. The number varies depending on such things as staff size and the scope of the MAPs identified.

In some cases counties may group one or more program thrusts identified by the County Extension Council into a single MAP. Conversely if the program thrusts are broad, it might be advisable to identify two MAPs which will address the broader program need. When the final list of county MAPs is created, local citizens should be

¹ Adapted from Delbecq, L L., Van de Ven, A. H. and Gustafson, D. H. *Group Techniques for Program Planning: A Guide to Nominal Group and Delphi Processes*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman & Company, 1975.

able to clearly see how Extension programs are addressing the priorities they helped identify.

MAPs help Extension staff organize their work into manageable pieces. They typically encompass all the work directed toward the achievement of one or more long-term outcomes. In addition, the name or title assigned to each MAP will provide a useful framework for communicating with external audiences.

Thus when “naming” the C-MAP consider the following questions:

- # Does the name communicate an intended action?
- # Does the name have appeal to external stakeholders?
- # Does the name accurately reflect the scope of programming included in the thrust?
- # Is the name concise, meaningful and free from jargon?

Examples of C-MAP titles that meet these criteria are, *Better Health Through Better Diets*, or *Increasing Farm Profits Through Diversification*.

MAKING A PUBLIC COMMITMENT TO ACTION

Making the general public aware of the overall Extension program is the responsibility of all Extension staff. Sometimes the public has relatively little information about the broad program directions guiding educational activities. Therefore, once the list of MAPs is finalized, it becomes important to publicly announce the new directions for Extension programs. Feature articles in local newspapers, direct mail flyers, or special editions of newsletters can all be used to announce the new program thrusts. Additionally, when reports are developed to highlight Extension’s accomplishments, organize the report around the county’s major areas of programming. These five to eight program thrusts become the Extension “sound bite” to communicate local needs and issues being addressed for the next four years.

Once again this is an appropriate place to further engage the County Extension Council in communicating major thrusts and building public support for program goals. The more diverse the CEC membership, the better able we are to offer relevant programs, promote and insure participation and gain new partners for comprehensive educational efforts.

Revised 2007 by Charlene Jacobs, Martha Nall, Chuck Stamper, Jeanne Davis, Ralph Prince and John Mowbray as a part of the 2008-12 County Plan of Work Development Process