



Systems for Planning and Reporting: Background and Implications for Staff

April, 2007

This has been a challenging year as we have implemented a system for organizational planning and reporting. Substantial work remains so that our system and tools can be tailored to serve the needs of multiple users, stakeholders and audiences (CSREES, Outreach, Extension Administration, Program Directors and staff, public partners).

On the broadest level, the need for transparency and accountability for Extension's work has driven our need for a new organizational approach to planning and reporting. The work we do must be clear to internal and external stakeholders. CSREES has also developed a new format for submitting federal plans and reports that necessitates changes in our systems and procedures. Even though our Federal Plan is for five years, the plan must be updated each year and reports are submitted annually in order to secure our federal funding.

In addition, the Vice-Provost for Outreach has requested quarterly progress reports ("scorecard reports") from all Outreach units (Extension, WFCR, UWW, CPE). She has allowed Extension to define the parameters of those reports and has agreed that the information should be consistent with our federal reporting requirements. As a result, we will be able to use a single system (PRiSM) to develop annual federal plans and reports as well as a quarterly scorecard.

CSREES - One Solution

In past years, federal requirements were relatively modest and planning and reporting could be organized into any units or set of projects. A text-based narrative was requested for each project, with no clear or enforced guidelines for what those narratives should contain. Beginning with the fiscal year 2007, CSREES launched a new planning and reporting system called "One Solution" with many innovations based on their need to report and advocate more effectively to their oversight agencies (USDA, Government Accounting Office, Office of Management and Budget).

One Solution allows state Extension programs to determine the categories they will use as a basis to plan and report, but within those categories there are very specific requirements. The categories for organizing work are referred to as "Planned Programs." Within each of the Planned Programs, states must identify a set of outcomes and then demonstrate quantitative progress towards those identified outcomes.

UMass Extension identified seven Critical Issues to serve as our Federal Planned Programs. (Initially, eight issues were identified, but 'Food Safety' has been subsumed under the broader issue of 'Health Promotion & Disease Prevention.')

Specification of the issues was based primarily on a series of discussions among Bob Schrader and the four Extension Program Directors. Alternative structures/arrangements for our planned programs were considered, however, Program Directors agree that there is great value in being able to report on our work in terms of publicly acknowledged issues such as 'Food Production' or 'Water Resource Protection,' as opposed to a set of planned programs that either reflect our own internal structure (e.g. the four Extension Program Areas) or functional teams within those units.

For our FY 2007 – 2011 Federal Plan of Work, our Issue Teams developed broad plans that identified priorities based upon information obtained from our 2006 stakeholder engagement process, as well as their knowledge of existing staff capacity and the potential for faculty collaboration. Each Issue Team also identified a set of outcomes that we are required to measure to demonstrate progress towards our planned programs. Planning and reporting with PRiSM will allow our organization to compile that information and meet the key federal requirement to report quantitative results for a specific set of identified outcomes within each Planned Program.

New England Planning and Reporting Collaboration

The PRiSM system was designed through a collaborative effort by State Extension systems from Massachusetts, Vermont, Maine and New Hampshire. For the past 2 years, William Miller of UMass Extension has worked with Extension colleagues from those states and has gained insights into many of the potential challenges and benefits. The other New England states are considerably further along than us. Maine and Vermont, in particular, have long histories of sustained organizational efforts and consistent expectations for planning and reporting for all staff. The Extension Directors in those states rely heavily on information from their organizational planning and reporting systems to advocate for Extension. In Vermont, it is more frequently within a campus context, as the Extension Director has access to data that demonstrates the breadth and depth of Extension's value to the work of academic departments. In Maine, the information is more frequently employed as a means to engage policy-makers and legislators and demonstrate the impact of Extension's work in specific communities and across the state.

In Massachusetts, our existing systems do not support a concise, compelling summary of the value and impact of our Extension Programs. When we engage with legislators or with College Deans and Department Heads, we are frequently not in a position of strength. The information we can currently provide about our work is mostly anecdotal and lacks a consistent structure or format necessary to support more powerful, comprehensive descriptions of the sum total of our organizational efforts.

Implications for Staff

The major change for Extension staff is that planning and reporting will occur online and in a significantly different format than in the past. A significant change is that reporting will

occur consistently throughout the year, against projects planned for that year, rather than once at the end. As staff become more familiar with the PRiSM system, planning and reporting will become less of a burden and additional uses for the information that is generated will become apparent.

One potential broad application involves facilitating communication between supervisors and staff. Staff may be expected to pursue new programming and funding opportunities as they arise, however, they may not feel they have the liberty to let go of existing responsibilities to free up the time that is necessary to effectively pursue work in emerging areas. As a result, staff may continually add new responsibilities directly on top of an existing work-load. The PRiSM system will provide a clear record and expectations for existing responsibilities, time investments, goals, etc, which can be used as a basis for discussion between staff and supervisors about setting priorities and managing workloads.

For planning and reporting to be successful, staff and directors must see the value for themselves and for the organization. To assist with this process, a committee was recently established to advise the development of organizational systems for planning and reporting, to provide leadership and to facilitate communication about planning and reporting with Extension Program Directors and staff. Current committee members include: Gretchen May (4-H), John Clements (Agriculture & Landscape), Paul Catanzaro (NREC), and Lisa Sullivan-Werner (NEP).