



Impact Statement : Alex Winter-Nelson

ProjectTitle: Increasing Impact of International Engagements in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences at the University of Illinois

Issue:

The College of ACES Office of International Programs exists to increase the impact of the College's teaching, research and extension by facilitating international engagement. The unit has worked to increase the capacity of individuals and of the institution as a whole to work in a global arena. Over an extended period of time the unit has developed an extensive range of activities and programs. These programs have had significant impacts, but there has been little effort to systematically track outcomes, assess the relative effectiveness of different programs, and consider next steps strategically. This project aimed to develop a system of tracking outcomes as a tool for strategic planning.

What has been done:

Step one: Defining the Mission.

The project began by turning to the mission statement of the unit in order to identify the logic models that connected activities to the goals implied by the mission. The mission statement itself proved to be a poor indicator of the purpose for the unit. This led to a period of consultation and discussion to define and articulate the mission of the Office.

Step two: Theories of Change.

Once the mission of the Office had been defined and accepted by staff and the larger university community, a set of relevant goals was developed internally. For each of the Office's activities, a theory of change was defined to link the activity to relevant goals that supported the mission. These theories of change or logic models informed the selection of outcomes to be tracked for each activity.

Step three: Outcome Tracking and Reporting.

Outcome tracking has been implemented through surveys of beneficiaries and participants in the Office's programs, including seed grants, travel support, symposia and seminars, grant writing assistance and other programmatic activities. A system has been developed to solicit information on outcomes at regular intervals and enter the results into a database. The outcomes are being reported to stakeholders as well as upper level administration.

Impacts/New Partnerships:

This process has allowed the unit to better communicate its impacts and value to upper level administration, internal audiences and external partners. As a result, the office is intensifying engagement in a number of fronts. More significantly, the information has helped us to make critical decisions about modifying programs, expanding specific types of programming and reducing other activities.

Outcome of Project (societal impact/ measure of increased quality of life)

The project has resulted in sharper focus in activities in the unit and a greater sense of purpose among the staff, including the Director. As a result of the activity we have also improved and more active relations with the full range of people around the world with whom the office interacts.

How has your project been aided by your FSLI experience?

The FSLI experience reinforced for me the conviction that tracking outcomes and monitoring performance needed to be grounded in a principled sense of the larger purpose of the unit. More importantly, the time in FSLI gave me insights in how to manage an inclusive process for defining a mission grounded in principles that could motivate and guide a diverse group of people.

For me, the most important aspect of the FSLI experience was raising my sense of my own strengths and weaknesses as a leader so that I could confront issues that might derail my efforts and build structures that played on my strengths.

Contact information:

Alex Winter-Nelson
Professor, Agricultural and Consumer Economics
Director, College of ACES Office of International Programs
1301 West Gregory Drive
Urbana, IL 61801
217 244-2295
alexwn@illinois.edu