A New Environmental Scanning Process for North Carolina Cooperative Extension.

Issue

North Carolina Cooperative Extension has had a long and rich history of identifying emerging trends and issues, developing and delivering responsive educational programs and improving the lives of North Carolina farmers, youth, families and communities. Various approaches have been taken to trend and issue identification process with the most common strategy being a five-year planning cycle that directed counties to conduct county-based environmental scans that were consolidated into a statewide scan for the state and ultimately was used to create the state, county and individual plans of work. While this strategy has served the NCCE well, the dynamic and escalating speed of change has created the need to consider a new and improved model for ensuring that NCCE is on-target with its educational programs. No longer can NCCE afford to wait five years to do an environmental scan and remain relevant!

What has been done?

A new NCCE environmental scanning process has been created and adopted. This is NCCE's new model for environmental scanning starting in September 2012. To develop a new system, a faculty member with expertise evaluation and statistical analysis was recruited to assist in taking the idea to scale. The collaboration with this faculty member brought skills to the ideation process that were essential for success. The new system is more dynamic and nimble in addressing emerging trends and issues. The model has three components:

1. **County-based Scanning** conducted on a 48-month cycle with 1/4th of the counties participating each year using the Delphi research technique with expert panels of community leaders that are representative of the population of the county.
2. **Statewide Scanning** conducted annually using the Delphi research technique with a state level panel of community and industry leaders with a focus each year on a different programmatic component of NCCE (Year 1 – ANR; Year 2 – Youth and Family; Year 3 – Community)
3. **Real-time Review** of existing data sets from other organizations and agencies that have crossover with NCCE. This includes US Census and other available data sets.
4. **Public, Web-Based Portal** that encourages citizens to help identify and input emerging issues and trends for NCCE consideration.

There are several unique characteristics in this model as follows:

1. County: The county-based scanning occurs annually with a representative sample of 25 counties and focus on broad issues that NCCE may or may not have capacity to address. By scanning on an on-going basis with expert panels of community leaders (thought leaders) at the county level, NCCE has a better understanding of emerging issues and is able to decide what adjustments need to be made at the state level in the programming being offered. If areas are identified that NCCE does not have capacity or expertise in, then NCCE may choose to develop that capacity or partner with other agencies to deliver on that need or hand off that need to another organization or agencies that has that capacity.
2. State: The statewide component will be based on the NCCE programmatic areas of Agriculture and Natural Resources, 4-H Youth Development, Family & Consumer Sciences and Community Development. An expert panel of community and industry leaders (thought leaders) in these areas will be identified and input and advice will be solicited to ensure that NCCE is on-target with its educational program offerings.
3. The annual review of data sets being developed by other organizations and agencies will ensure that there are not issues and trends being missed by the county and state processes. The public, web-based portal will also help to identify emerging issue gaps that may not surface through the county and state processes.

A key part of the strategy will be the establishment of expert panels with the representation of community and industry leaders (thought leaders). Specific criteria (including training for field faculty) will be developed by NCCE leaders to ensure that panels have true representation of NCCE client groups, including the breadth and diversity needed.

Impacts/New Partnerships

The impact of the new environmental scanning process can and should have lasting impact on Extension as it:

1. Ensure that NCCE is addressing relevant issues in the state.
2. Informs future NCCE's hiring decisions to address relevant issues.
3. Positions NCCE as a "go-to" source of information regarding the trends and issues impacting the state.

The partnership opportunities for NCCE will include:

1. Stronger ties with county government based on the data-driven programs being delivered by NCCE.
2. Increased visibility with and support from state and federal public policy partners due because of NCCE's ability to demonstrate relevance.

Outcomes of Project

The historical role of Extension to take research-based information from the university to the people of the state will be enhanced through the new environmental process. As NCCE grows in its ability to delivery relevant, high impact educational programs, the quality of life for youth and adults who participate in NCCE programs will increase. Another outcome of the project will be the building of greater capacity in the NCCE faculty and staff to use this approach for seeking input on other programs and projects that they are involved in. A final outcome will be the opportunity for NCCE to recruit a broader, more diverse clientele base as it seeks input from more diverse voices that reflect the demographics of the state.

How has your project been aided by your FSLI experience?

The FSLI experience required its participants to set significant goals in three different areas: professional, organizational and food systems. The new environmental scanning process was my food systems' goal. The FSLI experience provided me with the opportunity to focus on this goal area that was needed by NCCE and leadership tools to use in the development and accomplishment of the goal. The new Environmental Scanning Process for NCCE was developed and implemented during my FSLI experience.

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