

**Preliminary Report to ECOP on
Benchmarks of Excellence: A Survey of Extension Directors**

by
**Kimberly Rodrigues¹, William Peterson²,
and Shirley Humphrey³**

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This report focuses on ways to measure success in Cooperative Extension because legislators, university administrators and others want evidence that Cooperative Extension programs work. An ECOP subcommittee of the Personnel and Organizational Development Committee (PODC) asked Cooperative Extension administrators about benchmarks they used to measure success when dealing with personnel, programs, budgets, partnerships and technology.

Findings

Cooperative Extension administrators from 31 states, the District of Columbia and 2 territories responded to a questionnaire sent to all 50 states and territories). Fifteen (44%) administrators said that they use benchmarks. Nineteen (56%) said that they did not use benchmarks. Of the 19 respondents who did not use benchmarks, 15 (79%) said that benchmarks would be useful (Table 1).

Benchmarks are most often used for internal purposes. There were 20 responses to the questions as to whether the College of Agriculture Experiment Station had benchmarks. Twelve (60%) responded no. Eight (40%) responded yes (Table 1).

Most benchmarks are being used to satisfy reporting requirements to university administration or the state legislature, to determine new directions for Extension programming, and to justify funding.

Several benchmarks focused on performance evaluation for promotion and tenure and program design, delivery and evaluation. A few focused on improving public relations, legislative relationships, and university outreach. External benchmarks are often used to report to the state legislature, commodity groups, and Cooperative Extension program supporters (Table 2).

¹ **Regional Director, Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, North Coast and Mountain Region, University of California.**

² **PODC Organizational Culture and Change Subgroup Chair, University of Arizona.**

³ **Analyst, Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, North Coast and Mountain Region, University of California.**

Supportive Research

David Campbell, Director, California Communities Program, gleaned the following information from a seminar given by Mark Friedman (Appendix A). Friedman said that benchmarks frequently are statistics that are used to measure accomplishments. He added that if you see something that is negative and can intervene to prevent it from getting worse, that is an accomplishment, but it may not show up as a positive statistic. **(Who is Friedman?)**

Joseph S. Wholey, University of Southern California and Harry P. Hatry (Public Administration Review, November/December 1992, Vol 52, No. 6) argued that performance monitoring in public programs is feasible and worthwhile. They supported their thesis with examples from a range of national, state, and local governments.

Sid Gardner, California State University, Fullerton (Moving Toward Outcomes: An Overview of the State of the Art and Key Lessons for Agencies, October 11, 1996) concludes that results-based accountability can be a form of 'back to basics' that places clients, rather than agencies, in the center of our human services.

Campbell and Wright (Campbell, David and Joan Wright. In Press. **Thinking about Outcomes Assessment for UCCE Projects** University of California, Davis) found that "One of the surprises from this small study was the local decision makers placed a relative lack of importance on a project's linkage to community-level outcomes and indicators. They said that the track record of the project developers and the 'quality' of the project proposals were more compelling reasons for deciding which projects to support.

Several states commented on their development and use of benchmarks.

Cornell University's benchmark criteria include:

- ◆ Consistency with mission
- ◆ Relevance to current or emerging statewide initiatives
- ◆ Indicators of high impact, out-come based program (need, outcomes, impact, niche, accountability, implementation, diversity, image)
- ◆ Support, internal and external partnerships, structures and relationships (resources are adequate for success, roles and responsibilities clearly articulated, communication strategies, and staff decisions based on program and organizational priorities)

The Ohio State University has conducted an in-depth look at benchmarks, developed benchmark criteria, analyzed those at various land grant colleges and has rated the top 10.

Pennsylvania State University responded that the institution developed a monograph (<http://www.outreach.psu.edu/News/Pubs/Monograph/>) based on a Best Practices in Outreach and Public Service Conference held in October 1999.) The monograph represents key issues, challenges, successes, and opportunities discussed among the 329 participants. This group exchanged ways to move the outreach agenda forward.

Kentucky Cooperative Extension uses benchmarks as part of the personnel appraisal process.

Florida uses a survey to help evaluate whether programs are meeting clientele needs.

Nebraska has developed an electronic Extension Accomplishments Reporting System with a word searchable database (<http://deal.unl.edu/extension/ears/>) containing more than 700 impacts/outcomes. The system has been adopted by eight other states, and more than twenty states have looked at or adopted part of the model.

Discussion

Benchmarks have been set in many Cooperative Extension programs, but it was not clear if:

- ◆ baseline data is set,
- ◆ the benchmarks are being used to measure progress towards achieving an objective, gradually, steadily and continuously over several time intervals with a year,
- ◆ the benchmarks represent a higher expected level of performance than the previous benchmarks set at an earlier point in time.

The survey questions were designed to provide preliminary information so it was not possible to determine if good measures for noncredit workshops, conferences, seminars, or training events; lectures, addresses, or talks; consultation and technical assistance, and Cooperative Extension research programs are available or if the traditional benchmarks of research productivity, including the amount of external funding generated, number of grants, number and nature of research publications can be evaluated through some combination of client satisfaction surveys and evidence concerning the impact or utility of the work. This is an area that may need further study.

Extension professionals should keep in mind that funding sources want accountability and results. Evaluating program impacts appears to have the most value in determining whether an organization is accomplishing its goals. Keeping close contact with clientele will help ensure that programs meet their needs.

Next Steps

This report can be used to:

- ◆ Encourage dialogue among and commitment to identifying and reporting program improvement and success by CE administrators
- ◆ Develop a self-assessment tool that enables Cooperative Extension to establish indicators of success.

References

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