

Foundations of Political Effectiveness in Cooperative Extension—2009

Case study: SHEBOYGAN COUNTY

Situation

In 2005, a Program Evaluation and Prioritization Committee (PEPC) was formed in Sheboygan County. The 10-person committee consisted of the county board chair and the chairs of all of the standing committees. The group's intent was to evaluate all of the approximately 250 county programs to determine county funding priorities.

UW-Extension was not singled out in any manner, but was included with every other county program. Department heads for each program were asked to respond to 12 questions and the reply was limited to a two-page narrative in a certain font. The answers were scored on a scale of 0-5 with a max of 600-700 points. If a program was mandated, it started off with 50-100 points, placing the non-mandated programs at a decided disadvantage.

Response:

The entire staff of educators and support personnel was involved in preparing the response to the PEPC's request. A lot of office staff time and collective brain power was brought to bear on this request.

The Sheboygan County office looked at the two counties that had already gone through this type of prioritization exercise. In both of those counties, the Extension Department scored near the bottom of the program list. Looking at how those county Extension departments responded to this challenge, the Sheboygan County office devoted much thought on how to provide PEPC with very concrete, measurable information while avoiding the use of Extension jargon.

The office prepared information that showed dollar amounts, where applicable, of cost savings to the county for work Extension staff had provided and that would have otherwise required hiring costly consultants. This was especially true in relation to local government education, where it could be shown that the cost savings had consistently been around \$300,000 each year for the previous five years.

Staff provided concrete examples of how the Extension Department maximized county resources by providing train-the-trainer workshops, utilizing Extension specialist support, and mobilizing local volunteers. The Extension Department could document how it physically provided outreach education in all the communities in the county which, other than the Highway Department, no other departments could show.

The entire office identified the connections they had, if any, with county board supervisors. For example, on the PEPC, six of the ten members were people the CRD educator worked with directly. That meant that the majority of the PEPC already recognized the value of Extension.

County administrators had some struggle distinguishing between the big "P" Program versus the little "p" program. The Sheboygan County Administrative Coordinator ((now county administrator) expressed surprised when the department head initially stated that there were only four programs in the Extension Department. Humans Services, for

example, had over 50. Since the department was required to internally rank the programs, it would have meant determining which program area was number 1, which 2, which 3 and which 4. So, it was decided to have each program area submit three sub-programs for a total of twelve from the Department. The CNRED Program area, for example, submitted Community Development, Natural Resources Development, and Economic Development. Department staff agreed to rank one program from each Program area in the top third, allowing each Program area to get the highest points (50) for one of their programs. Ranking within those four had to be based on demand and resources allocated. It is interesting to note that the point spread was only 599-480 between all of the Extension Department programs. Some departments' programs ended up with scores in the 300's.

Outcomes

Two of the Extension programs scored higher than two of the three programs that the county administrator submitted. The end result at the county level was the elimination of only one program—the lowest ranked. It took three years to eliminate the program and only saved the county \$40,000.

Citizens and state and local government representatives value Cooperative Extension in Sheboygan County. The organization is viewed as a credible, unbiased resource. It has tremendous support, although it have not ever had the need to call on any of this support. The office has dual coverage in all program areas and is allotted five support staff. Over a million dollars was invested, plus \$100,000 for new furniture, in Extension's new facilities at UW-Sheboygan. This investment all occurred after the PEPC process was completed.

Bottom line: keys to building credibility and support with decision-makers—quality Extension programs, Extension educators going to the night meetings, putting in the time and working hard to build quality programs over time. Having satisfied clientele write complimentary letters after attending a program as an ongoing feedback mechanism doesn't hurt either! Everyone in the office has to step up—not just the department heads.