

What Is an Extension Program?¹

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Introduction

Although one might think that everyone in Extension understands the term *program*, it is often used in different, incorrect ways. Sometimes people use it to reference activities such as field days, demonstrations, or presentations. From a program development and evaluation perspective, however, it has a different and specific meaning. A program, as it is used here, refers to a comprehensive set of activities that includes an educational component that is intended to bring about a sequence of outcomes among targeted clients. Field days, demonstrations, and presentations could be included in the activities that are implemented to help participants meet the desired objectives and outcomes of the larger program.

Consider the following situation: You feel tired, are feverish, and have an upper respiratory infection, so you go to the doctor. The doctor assesses your symptoms and determines that you have pneumonia, then prescribes rest and a two-week course of antibiotics. As you get ready to leave the doctor's office, the doctor warns you to take all of the antibiotics. A week later, the doctor's office calls to check on your progress and encourages you to complete the course of treatment. Although you feel better after a few days, you complete the full course of treatment.

This example illustrates important aspects of a program. First and most importantly, a program must provide enough treatment to cause a cure. Without sufficient rest and the proper dosage of antibiotics, the patient might not recover. Second, the correct treatment should be effective, but the wrong treatment might do more harm than good. The same is true for Extension programs. Extension must provide enough activities or opportunities for learning (the treatment) in order for a program to have a real chance at helping clientele meet their needs (the cure). Those learning activities should be selected carefully based on research-based knowledge and an understanding of the target audience in order to avoid distributing information that could ultimately prove harmful rather than helpful.

This AskIFAS publication provides a definition for the term *program* and discusses the primary components included in a program.

Concept of a Program

Boyle (1981) defined a program as "the product resulting from all the programming activities in which the professional educator and learners are involved" (p. 5). Programming activities include conducting a needs assessment and situational analysis, setting priorities, developing a program rationale and management plan, marketing and recruiting, conducting learning events, evaluating outcomes, and reporting (Boone, Safrit, & Jones, 2002; Boyle, 1981; Harder, 2010). Given that a program involves evaluation and reporting, the definition clearly implies that the goal of a program is to achieve changes in clientele knowledge, attitudes, skills, or aspirations; clientele behavior; and/or the social, economic, or environmental conditions in a community (Bennett & Rockwell, 1995; Harder, 2009; Israel, Beattie, & Bengé, 2024). Collectively, these types of changes are referred to as *outcomes*.

Extension programs are organized in a variety of ways, and they address many different needs and issues. Every program has measurable outcomes; without measurable outcomes, programs are really just individual activities. Sample programs in Florida include:

Water Conservation

The University of Florida IFAS Manatee County Extension Water Conservation Program's Mobile Irrigation Lab (MIL) focuses on promoting outdoor water conservation and sustainable landscaping practices. The primary objective of the Mobile Irrigation Lab is to help residents reduce their irrigation water use while also promoting healthier landscapes and improved water quality. In 2024, the Mobile Irrigation Lab (MIL) helped numerous homeowners using reclaimed irrigation water make important adjustments to their systems. As a result of the team's recommendations, homeowners collectively saved enough water to prevent approximately 580 pounds of nitrogen from being applied to their landscapes—equivalent to 145 bags of fertilizer. This also contributed to healthier local waterways by reducing nutrient runoff. In total, 9,272,484 gallons of water were saved across the 180 homes evaluated. By focusing on both water conservation and water quality improvement, the Mobile Irrigation Lab continues to have a significant and positive impact on the environment.

4-H Healthy Living Through Gardening

The afterschool gardening program in Orange County aims to increase knowledge of healthy living practices through school-based gardens. The target audience for this program were 3rd–5th grade students who attended schools in Orange County that were in zip codes that were identified as areas where children were most at risk for negative outcomes through a survey conducted by Orange County government. The participating schools identified a program site teacher to be an onsite manager of the garden. The participating schools were provided all the materials for a productive garden, the program site teachers received training on how to manage and plant the garden, and youth were provided education on plant science, gardening skills, and nutrition by the 4-H agent. Under supervision of the 4-H agent, a 4-H program assistant teaches the program every other week (50%) and the on-site teacher supplements the material (50%) on the weeks the program assistant isn't present, using provided educational materials. Over six years, 629 youth at risk for negative outcomes participated in the afterschool gardening program. As a result, more than 92% of the youth have indicated an increased understanding of nutrition, gardening, and other healthy living concepts. At least 58% of participants stated that they are eating more vegetables in post-program surveys. In addition, students have shared that they have tried to eat "less greasy and fatty foods" after learning the nutritional difference between fried and baked potato chips.

The above examples illustrate that programs include many types of activities and outcomes. As the above examples illustrate, programs have several key elements:

- Multiple activities that build on and reinforce each other
- A focus on the needs of the target audience
- An intent to create change in a sequence of outcomes
- Ongoing monitoring to assess progress and a final evaluation to measure outcomes

A common misconception within Extension is that an activity is by itself a program: this is not so. Activities may lead to short-term outcomes being accomplished, but they usually lack the depth necessary to obtain lasting behavioral (mid-term outcomes) and social, economic, and environmental (SEE; long-term) condition outcomes.

Concept of a Program

Programs are those that require a substantial investment of resources (e.g., expertise, time, and money) to conduct, that have the potential for substantial impact, and that reflect a comprehensive set of individual educational activities (Summerhill, 1994). The main idea behind a program is that a bigger, more focused effort will lead to large-scale, significant impacts (i.e., improved social, economic, and/or environmental conditions). As a rule of

thumb, a program involves a minimum of 40 days of planned time during each year of a multiyear program. Programs often involve collaboration with county faculty members who have similar programs in other counties or with those in the same county who have complementary subject-matter expertise. Major programs also are likely to have strong linkages with state-level teams, which provide support with educational resources and related expertise.

The development of programs by Extension professionals is consistent with the expectations of clients and external stakeholders. That is, people expect Extension to do big things, and major programs are the mechanism for creating significant change. In addition, each Extension professional is expected to develop one or more major programs and report on their outcomes in annual reports of accomplishment. More importantly, being able to document the scope and impact of major programs is critical for achieving permanent status (or tenure) and promotion at the university.

Concluding Comments

Programs are the heart and soul of Extension work. Extension's clients and funders expect county and state faculty to design and implement programs that make a difference in people's lives, both individually and collectively. A clear understanding of the primary components of a program is the foundation for designing and delivering the type of programs that provide "solutions for your life."

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