Topic: Assessing and Using Data in Community Partnerships

Data collection and assessment strategies should be CO-CREATED WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS.

Speakers:
Dr. Paulina Velez (Program Evaluation Specialist; OCES)
Kimberly Williams (Program Evaluation Specialist; FCS Extension)

Summary:
Kimberly Williams began by asking participants the ways in which Cooperative Extension is related to community engagement. Several participants agreed that successful Extension programs embody best practices of community engagement. Dr. Kris Struckmeyer (Assistant State Specialist; FCS Extension) agreed but noted that before working in extension, he would not have connected Extension and community engagement. Dr. Kevin Moore (State Specialist; OCES) suggested that many people may think of Extension primarily in rural settings and community engagement primarily in urban settings. Dr. Paulina Velez argued that many members of Extension recognize this urban/rural distinction and are working to develop and showcase more diverse community partnerships that include a broader range of participants. These efforts are in part an effort to demonstrate to the state legislature and other funders the value of Extension activities. Williams noted that in this way, Extension can effectively build capacity in communities by connecting local organizations with one another.

Velez then turned the conversation to stages of data collection and assessment, beginning with evaluation design. All evaluation efforts should be created in full collaboration with community partners. Data collection and assessment should be co-created in discussion with the partners themselves. Early discussions should focus on clearly identifying stakeholders’ values and goals, as well as incorporating them into each phase of the final evaluation design. Groups such as existing program advisory committees in Extension can offer valuable input in this effort. Williams noted that effectively working with community members therefore necessarily includes
spending a significant amount of time with them in order to establish effective communication and build trust. University-affiliated researchers should be careful to clarify all terms, concepts, and methodologies included in a final plan. Velez argued that evaluation designs often focus too heavily on project outputs and outcomes. She instead recommended that researchers discuss program evaluation concepts, goals, and methodologies with community partners on a regular basis and in detail, capturing how the partnership evolves over time. Data collection should include information on all partnership activities and participants, including how each changes over time.

Williams argued that effective evaluation designs anticipate potential tension and misunderstanding between university and community stakeholders. Community members, she suggested, can find evaluation off-putting, especially if it appears to include critical comments or grades. Effective evaluation plans therefore include measures of interest to each stakeholder and university researchers should clearly communicate the positive consequences of appropriate evaluation. Velez argued that regular discussions with community stakeholders will help ensure that effective data is collected for all partners. She encouraged faculty to partner in this effort with a program evaluation specialist whenever possible. Moore recommended collecting as much data as possible throughout each project in order to maximize flexibility when conducting analyses during and after the project.

Velez and Williams argued that effective evaluation designs are living documents, frequently revisited and revised as necessary. Effective designs, for example, collect and analyse data as an ongoing process and do not rely on retrospective reports at the end of a project. Williams recommended being transparent in early conversations with community stakeholders about the inevitable constraints that will limit data collection and analysis. Doing so will help reduce unreasonable expectations and focus later revisions in areas where flexibility is possible and necessary. Velez noted that one frequent source of negotiation is in the extent to which project participants are anonymous. University IRB officials generally require participant anonymity before allowing faculty to publish their data. Yet at the same time, community members often want to know more detailed information about their area so they can more effectively apply limited public resources. Velez therefore also recommended including community partners in data analysis when possible. Williams agreed and noted that including community partners in all aspects of data collection and analysis can help avoid unexpected difficulties such as stakeholders requesting that some portions of an analysis not be released to the public.