

Executive Summary

Multi-Sector Community Collaboration – Assessing the Changing Environment For Extension Work

Sustaining UW-Extension's Key Role

Community Collaboration: A Strategy for Changing Times

Multi-sector community groups, known as coalitions or collaboratives, have become a familiar means of solving community problems, promoting system change and/or enhancing community well being. A multi-sector collaboration is a partnership formed by representatives of at least two sectors (non-profit, private, and public organizations and community members) to solve problems that impact the whole community.

Multi-sector community efforts emerged in response to complex issues where conventional approaches were not working. For example, people working to prevent substance abuse found that targeted programs might prevent abuse in a school while conditions elsewhere in the community were promoting use and abuse. Thus community-wide interventions became the chosen vehicle in public health and safety, violence prevention, family preservation and support, economic development and environmental stewardship. Governments and foundations now frequently require communities to develop coalitions when they apply for funding.

Coalitions and other collaborative efforts have strengthened community health and resilience by promoting economic development, inter-group relations and civic participation. They raise funds, implement new local service systems, foster coordination at the system and case levels and enable spin off initiatives. Studies also show some long-term effects on policy change and individual well being. The ability of coalitions to mobilize and focus resources has contributed to these successes.

In a study of 44 community groups addressing issues affecting families in 36 Wisconsin counties (Taylor-Powell et al., 2001) impacts on the community were shown in networks developed and grants written or funded. Further efforts were needed to build on these foundations and bring about changes in services, policies and conditions affecting families. Coalition members gained increased understanding of community needs, issues and resources and strengthened

sense of capacity to make a difference by working together, while ability to generate resources needed improvement.

The rapid spread of multi-sector collaborations has led to an increased understanding of coalition processes and outcomes. These efforts are complex and dynamic, as changes in membership, group development and action focus over time affect the capacity of the group to promote effective collaboration and sustain desired community change.

UW-Extension Responds to the Demand for Community Collaboration

As need and interest for collaborations spread, a significant emphasis on supporting multi-sector collaborations in University of Wisconsin-Extension programming for families and youth has emerged. UW-Extension educators are incorporating this demanding arena within their responsibilities.

Over the past decade and longer, Family Living Educators (FLE), Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program (WNEP) Coordinators and 4-H Youth Development (4-HYD) Educators in UW Cooperative Extension have expanded their involvement in a broad array of community partnerships, coalitions and other multi-sector groups. The Parent Support and Community Partnerships theme group of the Family Living Program developed resources and provided training on coalition development and evaluation. During the 1990's, WNEP programming expanded to additional counties and coalition initiatives addressing hunger, food security and nutrition proliferated, with support from statewide leaders. A statewide theme group, Creating Community Partnerships with Youth, provided leadership and support for 4-HYD faculty and staff. A newer emphasis on Community Youth Development now provides further impetus and leadership for this work.

During this period, County Extension Educators gained considerable experience in community collaboration, often serving as initiators and leaders in new coalitions. These roles carry new connotations for the UW-Extension mission. Educators are engaged in organizing and facilitating community development efforts, expanding on previous roles and playing new roles. Funders have begun to mandate collaboration and concerns about the sustainability of coalition efforts have emerged. As the programming environment changes, new demands and opportunities arise for County Educators' roles in community collaboration.

Assessing the Changing Environment

In late 2000, a team of UW-Extension Family Living specialists and County Youth and Family educators was formed to study the changing landscape of community work and staff needs for professional support. The Changing Environment Team focused on UW-Extension's work with multi-sector community groups (MCGs)—coalitions, networks, and collaborations that

involve various interests and organizations working together to address issues facing children, youth and/or families. Examples include: Safe and Stable Family Coalitions, Community-Based School Readiness Projects, Child Care Task Forces, Hunger Prevention Councils, Delinquency Prevention Advisory Groups and Tobacco or Alcohol and Drug Coalitions. The study set out to determine:

1. The extent that the work of County UW-Extension Educators involves multi-sector community groups and how “important” it is to them.
2. If, and how County UW-Extension Educators assistance in multi-sector groups has changed over the last five years.
3. The type of technical assistance groups and County UW-Extension Educators need to support their work.

In the first of the survey’s two stages, all UW-Extension FLP and 4-HYD Educators and all WNEP Coordinators (197 individuals in total) were asked to respond to an email survey regarding their work with community groups. Those who assist MCGs were then asked to respond to a web survey. The survey concluded in early Dec. 2001 with an overall response rate of 85% for each stage.

Findings

Several key findings emerged:

- Most UW-Extension educators support the work of multi-sector community groups (FLP, 94%; WNEP, 87%; 4-HYD, 73%). A high percent (81-93) of FLP and 4-HYD educators also work with traditionally supported community groups, such as 4-H Clubs and Home and Community Education clubs and associations.
- Most educators (85%) support one to six MCGs as a member of the group. On average educators support about 3.8 MCG's in this way. Thirty-seven percent support one to three groups as nonmembers.
- Educators indicated that the importance of working with MCGs has increased over time. The percent rating this work as very important at different time points was: 45% five years ago, 67% now and 72% in future.
- Educators indicated that MCGs need several types of technical assistance. Most (59-82%) felt UW-Extension has a responsibility to provide assistance in: evaluation; facilitation/group process; strategic planning; demographic data collection and analysis; and research-based content on children and family issues. UW-Extension was perceived to have less responsibility in fund development, recruitment and diverse membership, and marketing/public relations.

- Educators indicated that needs have changed because many groups are at a higher level of functioning, have increased accountability requirements, are more professionalized and more challenged to engage and sustain the participation of citizen volunteers.
- Many Educators indicated that they wish to strengthen their knowledge and skills in evaluation (69%), research-based content on child and family issues (58%), strategic planning (51%), facilitation / group processes (49%), and demographic data collection and analysis (47%).

Conclusions

A Dynamic Context

MCG work, when successful, brings issues to the forefront, enhances inter-group cooperation, increases access to funds, facilitates pooling and stretching of resources, reaches new audiences, and most importantly addresses complex community issues that no one organization or institution can tackle alone.

MCG work has become a central strategy for addressing issues with coordinated application of community resources. However, this can be time consuming and slow to show results. To be effective, MCGs must competently negotiate stages of group formation and building, direction setting, resource acquisition, implementation and evaluation. They must continually review and adapt over a multi-year process. A longer horizon is needed for accountability, along with a focus on group development, strategy development and implementation. Because MCGs have a wide range of changing technical assistance needs, attention should be given to when different types of assistance are appropriate and useful.

UW-Extension's Work With MCGs

Work with MCGs has become more important and central to FLP and WNEP programming over the last decade. 4-HYD educators are also becoming more involved in these efforts. Along with increased importance has come increased commitment of time and energy, as well as a refocusing of priorities and ways to accomplish them. Respondents expect the importance of this work to further increase in the future.

UW-Extension educators experience challenges in working with MCGs. Educators must adapt to groups with different strengths and stages of development. Work with MCGs often takes considerable time and urgent demands are difficult to manage. Significant knowledge and skill is needed to be effective and educators must often learn as they go while engaged with and assisting multiple groups.

UW-Extension's increasing involvement in MCG work calls for expanded educational roles. UW-Extension educators must choose and communicate such roles as: organizing coalitions and helping them to develop, sharing research, resources and other information, providing instruction, facilitating deliberations and problem solving, and designing or implementing educational programs. In some cases educators are shifting away from direct teaching as they devote more time to the educative potential of MCGs. Through MCG work they are reaching key community leaders and the public with education addressing important, recognized issues.

County Extension Educators are well positioned to provide assistance to MCGs in order to enhance the effective development and functioning of these groups, as well as connect members to resources outside UW-Extension. Findings indicate that the types of assistance educators believe they should provide corresponds to what they believe MCGs need.

Providing research-based content is a high priority of FLP and 4-H YD educators, an educational role as applicable to MCGs as to other audiences. UW-Extension should be known for providing research-based information about children, youth and families to coalition members. Increasingly UW-Extension can also become known for providing research-based information and support regarding MCG functions, development and outcomes.

Professional Development and Support

The study confirms that County Extension Educators serving children, youth and families need technical assistance and professional development support to build, expand and sustain competence in working with and assisting MCGs. Educators call for information and education about research on human and family issues and they call for education and support to strengthen their understanding and skill regarding the processes of MCG work.

The collaborative work of County Educators is currently supported by: access to print and web-based resources which provide research-based content on human and family issues and offer guidelines for community collaboration, by face-to-face conferences or training sessions, by informal networking with colleagues and others, and/or consultation with state specialists. Specialist resources in this area have decreased as key positions have gone unfilled, leaving an insufficient array of support.

Recommendations

Policy

This report provides strong evidence that working with multi-sector community groups is a critical part of County Extension Educators' current and future work.

The study documents the increasing involvement of FLP and 4-HYD County Educators in supporting the work of MCGs. Educators indicate that this work is very important to the success of their child, youth and family programming. Therefore, UW-Extension should recognize and affirm the legitimate and important work occurring in this area now and promote continued and expanded efforts in the future. UW-Extension should also identify this work as an essential core competency for faculty and staff in Family Living Programs and 4-H Youth Development and should consider the same designation in other program areas.

Programming

UW-Extension should develop and strengthen a system for supporting MCGs—a system that addresses areas of broad-based concern, that is responsive to needs of individual groups with different constituencies and issues, that builds on UW-Extension's mission and special strengths, that taps program area resources, that complements support available outside UW-Extension, and that capitalizes on capabilities of county educators. MCGs need timely research-based content regarding human and family issues and assistance in evaluating the quality of information. They also need support in developing and operating as an effective change system. The system for supporting MCGs must provide timely information and support recognizing that MCGs address fast moving, complex issues of broad concern.

Professional Development and Support

UW-Extension needs to provide the necessary professional development, technical assistance, training and ongoing support needed to strengthen the capabilities of county educators so they will be more effective in meeting the challenges of MCG work. UW-Extension needs to address broad-based concerns and also support smaller groups of educators with less prevalent, but important needs. Funds to support educator participation should be readily available. The system should build on and tap the expertise that has already been developed in the field.

Working with multi-sector community groups is complex and dynamic and can be very time consuming. Collaboration poses many challenges for UW-Extension practice and may call for new ways of supporting such practice. Each collaboration is dynamic and the context of multiple collaborations is also dynamic; thus learning must be ongoing.

Effective work with MCGs calls for educators with both specialized expertise and ability to integrate diverse content. Efforts should be made to strengthen connections between educators and specialists engaged in and supporting MCG work to enhance awareness of existing resources and support, and to foster specialized and integrative thinking and application. This means bringing

specialists in human and family content together with specialists in MCG processes, as well as generalists and other educators working directly with MCGs to jointly consider and integrate knowledge of children, youth and family within the context of MCG initiatives. Efforts must also be made to increase state specialist support for MCG work by drawing in more existing and/or new human and family specialists, by new hires with MCG process and other expertise, and by greater engagement of relevant specialists in the Community, Natural Resources and Economic Development program area.

Final Thoughts

UW-Extension educators experience new challenges and demands in working with MCGs. Extension's increasing involvement in MCG work calls for expanded educational roles. Through this work, UW-Extension educators are reaching key community leaders and the public with education addressing important, recognized issues.

UW-Extension educators are well positioned to provide and support the essential leadership, vision and support for multi-sector community groups to effectively deal with community issues. However, without quality professional development and ongoing support and technical assistance County Extension Educators will be hard pressed to continue effectively meeting these high priority programming needs with the high quality, cutting edge assistance expected from our organization.

As members of the Changing Environment team we asked many times how UW-Extension could most effectively meet the needs of multi-sector community groups as they act to address local issues involving children, youth and families. It is our earnest hope that this report will provide a platform to support the more specific assessment, planning and action that will provide answers to this question.

This summary report was completed in February 2003 by members of the Changing Environment Team composed of representatives of Family Living and 4-H Youth Development program areas and of the Program Development and Evaluation (PDE) office of UW-Extension, Cooperative Extension. The full report is available on the PDE website:
<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluation/evalstudies.html>