

Southern Region Program Leader Network: Providing Support and Catalyzing Action

Situation

The Cooperative Extension system strives to build strong multistate relationships. In 1989, the Southern Region Extension directors and administrators appointed a Southern Region Task Force on Organization to make recommendations on how to organize to meet regional issues and address multidisciplinary issues. Following the work of this task force, the Southern Region Extension directors and administrators created a Program Leadership Committee in 1990 to enhance multistate Extension collaboration. It was revised in 1995 to formally include 1890 institutions, revised again in 2002 to form the Program Leadership Network (PLN) and revised again in 2004 to form the Information Technology and Communications Committees from the original Communications and Information Technology Committee. The PLN meets annually face-to-face at varying locations in the Southern Region to bring together Extension directors and administrators, state program leaders, district directors/middle managers, information technology directors, and program and staff development specialists to discuss common issues. After almost 20 years in operation and several improvements to the original structure, research on the impact of the PLN on its 232 members was needed to understand the value of the network for Cooperative Extension.

Research Questions

This study focused on:

- How does the Southern Region PLN bring value to Cooperative Extension?
- How does the PLN enhance multistate collaboration?
- What change has resulted from the PLN?

Methodology

Five focus groups of 47 PLN members were conducted at the 2008 PLN, ASRED¹, and AEA² meeting. Each focus group represented a specific committee of the PLN (10 PLC³ members, 11 program leaders, seven middle managers, seven technology and communications leaders, and 12 professional and staff development leaders). Program Leader Network members attending the annual conference were contacted by e-mail to volunteer to participate in the study. A follow-up survey was sent to all 232 members of the PLN. One hundred four or 45% of the members responded. All surveys were usable. Institutional review board approval was granted by Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University for this project so results can be shared with select audiences.

¹ Association of Southern Region Extension Directors

² Association of Extension Administrators

³ Program Leadership Committee

The Researchers

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Dr. Scott Cummings from Texas A&M and Dr. Joyce Martin from Oklahoma State University also assisted with the focus groups.

Focus Group and Survey Findings

Participants

Forty-seven PLN members in the focus groups ranged from their first year of involvement in the PLN to 14 years of involvement. The type of involvement ranged from committee participation/membership, to committee leadership, and external leadership and representation roles.

Of the 104 PLN members who participated in the follow-up web survey, 50% have been involved for five or less years, 32% have been involved for six to 10 years, and 17% have been involved more than 10 years. The remaining 1% did not answer the question. Fifty-two % of participants have served as a committee member, 27% have provided committee leadership, and 3% have represented PLN outside the committees. Several individuals have served in administrative roles and many others have had multiple roles over their PLN participation. Respondents to the survey were involved in the follow committees: 21% middle managers, 16% program and staff development, 13% IT/Comm, 13% FCS program leaders, 12% CD program leaders, 11% 4H program leaders, 6% ANR program leaders, and a few were administrative advisors.

Motivation to Participate

Those in the focus groups participate in PLN because it provides networking and collaboration building with peers, with others across Extension professions and across states. They also attend for professional support that gives them a more holistic sense of Extension work, their own personal work, and keeps them on task by being accountable to their peers for progress on projects. Some participants said they were required to attend PLN to bring back best practices to their organization and represent their institution.

Participants who responded to the web survey were motivated to participate for the following reasons:

- Networking (87%)

- Collaboration building (85%)
- Professional support (74%)
- Gain more holistic sense of Extension work (38%)
- Job expectations (36%)
- Show accountability to peers on joint work (19%)

One or two individuals stated they are involved in PLN to learn what other states are doing, to share their own work, to stay abreast of best practices in Extension programs, to acquire program resources and reinforcement, and to meet federal multistate programming requirements.

Best Features of PLN

Focus group participants believe the most important aspects of the PLN include training, group discussions, sharing of best practices, networking, and developing leadership skills while serving in committee leadership roles. Of specific note, participants find PLN provides space and time to have deep discussions about their work and helps get a variety of leaders together and on the same page with Extension work. One participant said, “PLN gives us enough time to have thoughtful conversations unlike other conferences,” and another said, “Discussions are very lively and give us food for thought. This discussion allows each person to benchmark their institution against peers, creates multistate projects, takes individuals and their work to the next level, and saves time and money at home.” In particular, participants said, “You build trust in colleagues and their opinions that help keep you up to speed,” “You don’t have to start efforts from scratch,” “PLN keeps us on our toes,” and “You leverage knowledge you don’t have in your own state.”

Networking was mentioned often as a benefit of PLN. Participants enjoy networking for personal and professional support, ongoing work with particular individuals, building respect and appreciation for each other, and for Extension as a whole. Networking also helps them get a sense of emerging issues. Participant’s comments about networking through PLN include, “It helps you feel more connected,” “If I have problems, I know people who can help. They are my security blankets,” “It pumps you up to keep moving. It is a therapy session,” and “PLN is the one meeting I look forward to every year. It is the one meeting I hate to leave. This group is like family. We can disagree but remain strong friends.”

Participants who responded to the web survey liked the following items best about the PLN:

- Sharing best practices (83%)
- Networking (82%)
- Discussions (75%)
- Exploring emerging issues (76%)
- Developing and supporting multistate projects and partnerships (63%)
- Developing leadership skills (41%)
- Benchmarking their home institution with peers (33%)
- Training (23%)

One individual stated it was also valuable to socialize with friends in the region.

Value of PLN for the Individual

The vast majority of focus group participants agree PLN was valuable. The most often mentioned benefits were mentoring to assist with gaining job competency and problem solving, leadership skill development, building confidence in work and personal skills, building networks, training/professional development, critical reflection on their work, a wider view of Extension work, and catalyzing connections with people and best practices in their work. Participant comments about PLN benefits included, “I learn from other’s wisdom,” “This group helped me figure out my job,” and “I respect and know colleagues enough to trust their ideas.”

Participants who responded to the web survey gained the following as an individual by participating in PLN:

- Building networks (85%)
- Implementing and adapting new ideas and best practices (71%)
- Widening their view of Extension work (51%)
- Catalyzing connections with people (46%)
- Reflecting critically on their work (42%)
- Training/professional development (40%)
- Developing leadership skills (33%)
- Gaining confidence in work and personal skills (33%)
- Mentoring for job competency and problem solving (25%)

One individual also said the PLN helps them as an individual develop strategic direction for Extension programming. Another said that PLN provides very little individual value.

Value of PLN for Committees

The most common value of PLN articulated for committees was the opportunity to build on and leverage each other’s ideas and best practices. The PLN is seen as a place where ideas begin and later gain larger prominence. One participant summed this up by saying, “We work together and get things done. We make a difference in our state with the work we do and some of our work moves from the committee to the Southern Region and then national projects” (i.e. eXtension was often mentioned).

Committees valued the help given to members to problem solve and deal with struggles, joint projects and shared resources that save time and money, and the opportunity to work with Southern Region directors and administrators to have a national voice and to build legitimacy, credibility, and influence. One participant said, “We speak stronger as a group.” They see this southern solidarity as a great infrastructure to communicate within to support each other, build stronger bonds between 1862 and 1890 institutions, keep members of each organization on their toes, and increase funding for projects.

Participants who responded to the web survey believe PLN is of value to their committee for the following reasons:

- Building on and leveraging each other's ideas and best practices (73%)
- Helping each other problem solve and deal with struggles (72%)
- Supporting each other (72%)
- Developing joint projects/share resources that save time and money (55%)
- Initiating ideas in committee that later gain larger prominence (44%)
- Working with Extension directors/administrators for national voice (43%)
- Building stronger bonds between 1862 and 1890 institutions (41%)
- Developing and supporting southern solidarity (35%)
- Keeping members on their toes/accountable for joint work (14%)
- Increasing funding for projects (11%)

One individual stated their committee learns about initiatives pursued by other committees and another said they represent national Extension efforts. One individual isn't sure what the value of PLN is for committees and another said there is not enough 1890 involvement to build bonds.

Value of PLN for State Extension Systems

The most often mentioned value of the PLN for state Extension systems was saving time and money through multistate partnerships and projects (for example sharing a Centra license across several states), implementing and adapting new ideas and best practices, collaboration, and catalyzing organizational change. State Extension systems have also benefited from building a stronger bond between 1890 and 1862 programs, training for employees (for example the middle managers conference), exposure to key note speakers to use locally, employee recruitment, and recognition of and affirmation of best practices used by their system.

Participants who responded to the web survey believe the PLN provides the following value for their state Extension system:

- Implementing and adapting new ideas and best practices (75%)
- Enhancing collaboration (68%)
- Recognizing and affirming best practices used by their system (60%)
- Saving time and money through multistate partnerships and projects (41%)
- Building a stronger bond between 1890 and 1862 institutions (35%)
- Exposure to keynote speakers for local use (33%)
- Catalyzing organizational change (28%)
- Training for employees (26%)
- Recruiting employees (9%)

One respondent said the PLN has very little value for their state Extension system.

Value of PLN for Extension in General

Overall the participants felt PLN creates southern solidarity that results in multistate projects that increases the depth and scope of programming. It also leverages

knowledge and other resources, provides networking and support, fosters a wider view of Extension work, provides professional development and sometimes results in national influence. In addition, participants mentioned the PLN assists with peer group development and enhancing the bond between 1862 and 1890 Extension programs by spending time in together.

Participants who responded to the web survey felt the PLN provides value to Extension in general in the following ways:

- Leveraging knowledge and resources (75%)
- Providing networking and support (75%)
- Developing multistate projects that increase programming depth and scope (62%)
- Peer group development (57%)
- Fostering a wider view of Extension work (56%)
- Influencing Extension at the national level (56%)
- Enhancing the bond between 1862 and 1890 Extension programs (49%)
- Providing professional development (46%)
- Supporting southern solidarity (32%)

One individual felt the PLN resulted in the establishment of CECF and eXtension. One other respondent was unsure of the value the PLN brings to Extension in general.

Changes in Work Due to PLN

When asked how the PLN has changed participant's work, they responded that they now work smarter, have improved their effectiveness by adopting best practices from other states, they think about their resources differently, and they feel more supported in their work. They also feel recharged by PLN and find their director/administrator shapes their work based on their PLN discussions with peers.

Participants who responded to the web survey believed the following changes have taken place in their work due to the PLN:

- Improved effectiveness by adopting best practices from other states (66%)
- More support in their work (48%)
- Think about their resources differently (48%)
- Feel recharged (35%)
- Work smarter (21%)
- Director/administrator shapes their work based on PLN discussions (13%)

One individual feels the PLN has given them a regional view of Extension and another brings home valuable information to share with others in the organization. One individual stated their work has not changed due to the PLN.

Describing PLN

When participants were asked to share one word that describes PLN, they used the following: effective, networking, collaboration, cutting-edge, southern region, multistate,

sharing, leadership, resources, synergy, catalyst, and change. Survey participants were not asked to share a word to describe the PLN.

Main Themes

Reviewing the comments across all five focus groups and the web survey the following themes emerged regarding the value of the Southern Region PLN:

- Networking through the PLN results in enhanced individual performance, multistate projects, and national influence
- Discussions at PLN result in critical thinking about the depth, scope, and appropriateness of the work
- Leveraging information by sharing best practices saves time and money, improves progress, and shapes some participant's job responsibilities
- For some individuals, PLN provides opportunities for leadership and other skill development through mentors and committee roles, collaboration, and partnerships
- The 1862 and 1890 Extension relationship is enhanced by PLN interaction
- The PLN is a place where ideas are initiated and often become multistate or national projects

Overall value of the PLN is expressed by the vast majority of those participating in this research.

Implications

The results of this study suggest the following implications for Extension:

- Directors and Administrators should encourage individuals in new leadership roles in their organization to attend PLN with the expressed goal of identifying peers who can serve as mentors and coaches
- Directors and Administrators need to evaluate if there are individuals who are not attending PLN who might benefit from the benchmarking and shared learning that occurs
- PLN conferences should be designed to enhance cross-state and cross program area discussions to maximize collaboration, benchmarking, and peer coaching
- The 1890 system should seek opportunities within their established structure to identify individuals in the organization to participate in PLN to capitalize on the expressed strengths of this organization
- 1890 and 1862 universities should seek opportunities at PLN to share and enhance program relationships and collaborations
- The PLC should use the data from this study to market the PLN with new participants, Directors, and Administrators
- Each PLN committee should facilitate a discussion on the implications of this study data for their group's effectiveness
- Other Extension regions and organizations should review this model as a way to enhance multistate programming and to catalyze development and adoption of best practices

Considerations

This study reflects only the perspectives of 47 focus group and 104 survey respondents out of the whole PLN membership of 232 individuals. Future inquiry should be done on how the PLN could improve to better bring value to all of its members.

Conclusion

It appears the most valued aspects of the Southern Region PLN are networking and support through colleagues, multistate projects and support, influence at the state and national levels and unique personal and professional development opportunities. The deep and stimulating discussion that takes place at PLN fosters these valued aspects and results in individual, group, and organizational change.