

Southern Region Program Leader Network: Providing Support and Catalyzing Action

The Southern Region Extension directors and administrators created a Program Leadership Committee (PLN) in 1990 to enhance multistate Extension collaboration. The PLN brings 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. In particular, 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?*

Five focus groups of 47 PLN members were held in 2008 of 10 PLC¹ members, 11 program leaders, 7 middle managers, 7 technology and communications leaders, and 12 professional and staff development leaders. A follow-up survey was sent to all 232 members. One hundred four or 45% of the members responded.

Motivation to Participate

Participants 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%)

Best Features of PLN

Participants 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%)

Value of PLN for the Individual

¹ Program Leadership Committee

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Participants 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%)

Value of PLN for Committees

Participants 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%)

Value of PLN for State Extension Systems

Participants believe the PLN provides the following value for their state:

- 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%)

Value of PLN for Extension in General

Participants felt 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%)

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- 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%)

Changes in Work Due to PLN

Participants believed these 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%)

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

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

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- 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

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.

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