# Program Quality Indicators

**MINNESOTA EXTENSION SERVICE**
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

**The Authors:**    Marsha R. Mueller, Chair
Specialist, Program Evaluation

Ann Bosch
County Extension Director, Kandiyohi County

Randy Cantrell
Acting Program Leader, Community Economic Development

Marilyn Grantham
Program Leader, Agriculture

Gary Hachfeld
County Extension Director, Nicollet County

Janet Krofta
Assistant to Assistant Director for Home Economics

Diana Martenson
County Extension Director, Traverse County

Lee Raeth
County Extension Director, Carlton County

Barb Warren
Human Resources Leader

# PROGRAM QUALITY INDICATORS

# Introduction

To focus our efforts and achieve results, we in Extension must be clear about what we mean by program quality. Further, we need to know and agree on what others can expect when we talk about quality extension programs.

During the summer of 1989, the Minnesota Extension Service developed a program quality statement. The authoring team recognized that defining *quality* can be approached in a variety of ways and established some parameters to its task. In general, any statement about *quality* must define the concept in terms of Extension educational programs. Specifically, a quality statement must exhibit the following:

- share principles and common language to facilitate communication, program action, and assessment;

- reflect the relationship between our mission, strategic plans, and practice in terms of program quality; and

- balance traditional wisdom about sound educational practice, contemporary realities, and the future orientation of MES.

The following definition was released in January, 1990 as a discussion draft. The assumption underlying its on-going draft status is that a quality definition is relevant to the extent that it makes sense; that means it must be open for discussion, debate, and modification.

Thus, the purpose of this document is to encourage discussion about what MES educational program quality means among staff, extension partners, and university collaborators. The discussion and responses by those who read this document will continue the process of focusing our attention and action on MES program excellence.

# Overview    Program Quality Indicators

**Purpose:**    Quality assurance. The Minnesota Extension Service (MES) is committed to providing quality educational programs to the people of Minnesota. Program quality indicators reinforce our commitment by clearly noting what our standards are. Quality indicators are principles which guide program action that makes a difference on important problems.

**Use:**    By program teams, Extension partners, and clientele as guides for program development and program quality assessment.

**Focus:**    Extension educational programs.

**Assumptions:**    <u>MES programs are results oriented</u>. The purpose of Extension's educational programs is to make a visible difference on important problems.

<u>Programs and problems exist in complex environments.</u>

<u>Programs and problems are dynamic systems</u>. Programs and problems are the result of interaction between multiple actors, processes, actions, resources and problems during a specified period of time.

<u>Programs are focused on important issues for a specific amount of time.</u>

<u>There is no *one* way to design or implement an extension program</u>. Complex issues require multiple approaches.

**Key Concepts:**     **Program** is the label we use to describe a range of purposeful actions, during a specific period of time, which are intended to make a difference in a problem. Extension programs are time limited and evolve in overlapping **phases.** Inherent to each phase is a **central question** which drives decision making and action. **Quality indicators** are the principles which guide decision making and action processes (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Key Concepts and Relationships**

| Program Phase | Central Questions | Quality Indicators |
|---|---|---|
| Problem Selection | What important societal problems exist which justify MES attention? | Important<br>Focused<br>Grounded |
| Commitment | Can MES make a difference in the problem? | Timely/Time Limited<br>Credible<br>Capacity |
| Strategy Implementation | What needs to be done in order to make a visible difference in the problem? | Results Oriented<br>Responsive<br>Feasible<br>Flexible/Adaptive<br>Systematic |
| Review/Sunset | What did we learn?<br>What should we do next? | Utility<br>Evidence<br>Follow Through |

# Program Phase: Problem Selection

*Central Question:* *What important societal problems exist which justify MES's attention?*

**Explanation:** Problems/issues are complex. No matter how well we design and implement a program, if we do not understand, interpret, and focus the problem we're addressing, the results we can achieve will be limited.

Problems must be interpreted and focused within the context that a program operates. Interpreting the problem justifies the need for the program and provides important direction for strategy. Grounding a problem illuminates what we can do about it. Focusing a problem identifies what parts of the problem we will address.

Considerations may include:

Problem/issue magnitude: what are the current size, trends, future directions, and geographic distribution of the problem?

Problem awareness/visibility/prominence: to what extent is the public aware of the problem?

Problem seriousness: what are the social, economic, human consequences anticipated if the problem is not addressed--is the problem important?

Affected groups: what groups/individuals are most affected by the problem?

What is known about cause/symptom relationships: what are the implications for program strategy?

Problem indicators: what indicators of the problem are we capable of addressing? What problem indicators will we commit to having an impact on?

Potential for duplication/collaboration: what other public and private programs exist which are aimed at the same problem?

*Selecting a problem requires practical judgment. Making a difference in a problem requires interpreting the problem into a reasonable program strategy.*

**Quality Indicators:**

**Important**

**Focused**

**Grounded**[1]

**Criteria:**

- The problem is important.

- Extension has an important role to play.

- The problem is recognized and marketable.

- Other efforts addressing the problem are identified and involved.

- The problem is locally interpreted.

- Problem impact indicators are specified.

---

[1]A grounded problem is one which is understood in its complexity. This means that what is known about a problem is meshed with how the problem actually plays out (i.e., what it looks like and how it works)--in a specific context. By blending what is known from research about how a problem works with what we see, observe, and hear, we can develop program strategies that make sense. We need to know how a problem is understood from the research perspective and what it looks like and means in communities, in the lives of real people, and in society.

# Program Phase: Commitment

*Central Question:*   *Can MES make a visible difference in the problem?*

---

**Explanation:**    An Extension program represents our commitment to make a difference in a problem. That commitment implies significant increased effort in the form of time, credibility, and capacity.

*Time.* High impact programs are timely--they may anticipate a problem or be responsive to an existing problem. In addition, high impact programs have an end point; they do not go on forever. An endpoint clarifies the time period in which significant effort is committed to addressing the problem.

*Credibility.* As an outreach arm of the University of Minnesota, a key attribute of our programs is research-based information. Quality extension programs are grounded on credible information and present alternative perspectives when research based information conflicts. In addition, MES's credibility includes the commitment to consider the ethical[2] and political[3] implications of addressing the problem.

*Capacity.* Sufficient inputs (expertise, time, dollars) are required for programs to become more than a good idea and to make a difference in problems. A mix of inputs is needed and together those inputs represent our capacity to do the work that needs doing.

---

[2]Ethical considerations are important when we work with complex social issues. Complex issues (eg. biotechnology, AIDS, teen pregnancy) require not only technical understanding but appreciation of multiple value perspectives.

[3] It is important to recognize existing vested interests in the problem arena to understand the potential for successful implementation of extension programs.

Our capacity includes:

- team and individual expertise;
- collaboration/networks with other agencies, groups, organizations, university departments;
- stakeholder/partner support and collaboration;
- university generated research based knowledge
- financial resources;
- appropriate reporting/accountability; and
- problem monitoring.

**Quality Indicators:**

**Timely/Time Limited**

**Credible**

**Capacity**

**Criteria:**

- Timing is right--the program is neither too early nor too late.

- Program sunset is defined--time limits are specified.

- A research base exists, is identified, and incorporated.

- Ethical implications of addressing the problem are considered.

- Individual and team expertise exist or can be acquired.

- Key stakeholders/partners/ collaborators are informed and involved.

- Political implications (risks and benefits) are considered.

- Financial resources are negotiated.

- Accountability means are established.

- Means are established to monitor the problem.

# Program Phase: Strategy Implementation

*Central Question:* *What needs to be done to make a visible difference in the problem?*

**Explanation:** The purpose of program strategy is to make a difference in a problem. Program strategy includes the components (parts) of programs and delivery. In total, strategy provides direction for action.

Components of an extension educational strategy include some or all of the following: technology transfer; information dissemination; problem solving; or long-term development and change efforts. Program components may be pre-planned, added, and/or adapted during implementation to fit the problem arena, targeted clientele, and changes in the nature of the problem. Educational strategy includes, but goes beyond, content and method decisions, design of educational products, facilitation, and program management.

Strategy formulation and implementation is a dynamic interactive process. *The primary concern surrounding all strategy decisions is how well program strategy fits the problem and whether strategy actions take us closer to results.*

**Quality Indicators:** **Results Oriented (Purposeful)**

**Responsive**

**Feasible**

**Flexible/Adaptive**

**Systematic**

**Criteria:** • Program components are logically linked and have the potential for making a difference in the problem within a specified period of time.

- Implementation (content, frequency of exposure, and delivery) is sufficient to make a difference in the problem.

- Delivery is appropriate for targeted clients.

- Program components and implementation fit current or anticipated capacity--it's do-able.

- Program response is immediate (short lead times).

- Delivery is managed and systematically adapted as conditions change--we know what's going on. Program and problem monitoring information is used to make changes in strategy implementation.

# Program Phase: Review/Sunset

*Central Questions:*   *What did we learn?  What should we do next?*

**Explanation:** High impact programs do not fade away unnoticed -- they are thoughtfully assessed and follow through action is taken. Sunset, then, is a bench mark (reference) point. Review occurs at the designated time limit of a program. Sunset work addresses two questions: (1) what did we learn? and (2) what should we do next? Next steps are the movement to the future. Key attributes of this phase are utility, evidence, and follow through.

Utility underscores and links the practical and purposeful nature of sunset tasks: assessment, decision making, and action. Useful assessment provides empirical grounding for judging results and deciding what to do next. Consequently, useful assessment questions are linked to decisions which must be made and form the basis of evidence plans. Program assessment and sunset decisions are useful to the extent that outcomes are communicated and next steps (action) are accomplished.

Evidence specifies data quality. Assessment requires balanced evidence about multiple program levels, from multiple sources, and changes in problem indicators.

Follow through recognizes the active nature of sunset. It is important to communicate what we have learned, fulfill our public accountability responsibility, and initiate next steps. Next steps are the movement to the future. Next steps may include program modification (and recommitment), transferring the program to others, and/or redirecting resources to new efforts.
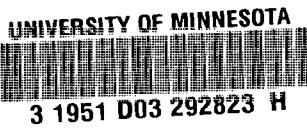
**Quality Indicators:**   Utility

Evidence

Follow Through

**Criteria:**

- Appropriate stakeholders are involved in sunset assessment and decision making processes.

- An evidence plan focuses on important questions--questions which will illuminate program results, impact, and support relevant decision making.

- Assessment evidence is available at the preset sunset date--data collection and analysis is planned for and precedes sunset.

- Evidence is balanced. Evidence reflects multiple levels of program operation from multiple sources and changes in problem indicators.

- Assessment findings and next step decisions are communicated to clients and stake holders.

- Next steps are accomplished.

| Program Phase | Central Questions | Quality Indicators | Criteria |
|---|---|---|---|
| Problem Selection | What important societal problems exist which justify MES's attention? | Important<br>Focused<br>Grounded | •The problem is important.<br>•Problem impact indicators are specified.<br>•The problem is locally interpreted.<br>•Other efforts addressing the problem are identified and involved.<br>•Extension has an important role to play.<br>•The problem is recognized and marketable. |
| Commitment | Can MES make a difference in the problem? | Timely/Time Limited<br>Credible<br>Capacity | •Timing is right--the program is neither too early nor too late.<br>•Program sunset is defined--time limits are specified.<br>•A research base exists, is identified, and incorporated.<br>•Ethical implications of addressing the problem are considered.<br>•Political implications (risks and benefits) are considered.<br>•Individual and team expertise exist or can be acquired.<br>•Key stake holders/partners/collaborators are informed and involved.<br>•Financial resources are negotiated.<br>•Accountability means are established.<br>•Means are established to monitor the problem. |
| Strategy Implementation | What needs to be done in order to make a visible difference in the problem? | Results Oriented<br>Responsive<br>Feasible<br>Flexible/Adaptive<br>Systematic | •Program components are logically linked and have the potential for making a difference in the problem within a specified period of time.<br>•Implementation (content, frequency of exposure, and delivery) is sufficient to make a difference in the problem.<br>•Delivery is appropriate for targeted clients.<br>•Program response is immediate (short lead times).<br>•Program components and implementation fit current or anticipated capacity--it's do-able.<br>•Delivery is managed and systematically adapted as conditions change--we know what's going on. Program and problem monitoring information is used to make changes in strategy implementation. |
| Review/Sunset | What did we learn?<br>What should we do next? | Utility<br>Evidence<br>Follow Through | •Appropriate stake holders are involved in sunset assessment and decision making processes.<br>•An evidence plan focuses on important questions-- questions which will illuminate program results, impact, and support relevant decision making.<br>•Assessment evidence is available at the preset sunset date--data collection and analysis is planned for and precedes sunset.<br>•Evidence is balanced. Evidence reflects multiple levels of program operation from multiple sources and changes in problem indicators.<br>•Assessment findings and next step decisions are communicated to clients and stake holders.<br>•Next steps are accomplished. |

AD-FO-5508-S