Workshop

Introduction: Advancing Technology Adoption and Achieving Extension Impact: A Working Group Success Story

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SUMMARY. Multistate collaborations enable extension professionals to reach their audience across a region with similar production challenges. The objective of this article is to introduce the three proceeding manuscripts delivered at the American Society of Horticultural Sciences annual conference in Atlanta, GA, as part of a workshop entitled “Advancing Technology Adoption and Achieving Extension Impact: A Working Group Success Story.” Topics discussed in the following manuscripts include the development of a multistate working group and the advantages associated with participation, development and impact of book or electronic book publications, and survey results from more traditional hands-on workshops. The goal of this workshop was to provide guidance to others who wish to establish multistate, multidisciplinary collaborative teams as well as use new education formats.

Available funding for extension programming significantly decreased during recent recessionary periods [2008–11 (Floyd, 2014; Oliff et al., 2013; Serenari et al., 2013; Warner et al., 2014)], and in many cases, has not returned to pre-recessionary levels (French and Morse, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2014). Extension programs, publications, and other materials must be reasonably priced in order for the audience to

attend programs or access materials. Budget cuts typically result in reductions in staff or faculty positions, programs, travel, and other items that are essential to achieve significant extension impacts (Payne, 2004). As federal funding decreases or remains at current levels for extension-related projects and programs, there is a corresponding increase in need and competition for external funding (Morse, 2009). Although the available resources for extension professionals has declined in recent years, the needs of their audience remains constant or often increase during recessionary periods (Marble et al., 2016), leading to the adoption of new approaches for reaching a wider audience.

Although funding for traditional face-to-face extension programming has generally decreased, universities have tended to increase investment in information technology and distance

education, as well as informal learning opportunities (Wells, 2004). As the internet is now available virtually anywhere in the developed world, electronic delivery of information has become a preferred method for informal education (Rich et al., 2011) and has been shown to be effective at reaching green industry professionals (VanDerZanden, 2013a, 2013b).

Extension professionals need to increase multistate collaboration to address current fiscal challenges and take advantage of available technology and adoption by nursery growers. Collaborative research and extension efforts allow a group to more effectively and efficiently reach producers across a region that often produce similar crops and deal with similar pest and production issues without duplicating efforts. Collaborative efforts also allow a group to reach a broader audience as a whole to better serve the intended audience by maximizing the expertise of individual members who specialize in one aspect of production or another.

This workshop had two primary objectives. First, to provide an overview of the benefits of creating and joining a working group in terms of extension impact and faculty success, using the Southern Nursery Integrated Pest Management (SNIPM) working group as a case study. Secondly, to share experiences including successes and challenges associated with developing both traditional books and electronic books (eBooks) and hands-on workshops. Lastly, this workshop aimed to discuss how to successfully establish extension impacts from these activities and resources. Four papers were presented from a multidisciplinary team representing different institutions in the southeastern United States. This team had valuable experience working as a group to achieve extension impacts for nursery growers in the southeastern region using a variety of educational tools.

The first paper discussed how to create a working group using the SNIPM group as a case study. This paper addressed how the SNIPM working group was developed, including establishing need and determining the focus of the group, how membership was determined, and how the group used initial funding to leverage future projects. This paper also discussed how stakeholders,

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funding agencies, and members have achieved synergy from membership, how funding and preliminary projects were leveraged and stimulated additional funding as well as extension and refereed publications, and the ratio of deliverables to funding achieved by the working group.

The second and third papers addressed the development, success, and pitfalls associated with developing books/eBooks and hands-on workshops to reach an extension audience. Both of these papers addressed how to accurately determine extension impact of different forms of communication (oral, print, etc.) in terms of dollar savings and practices changed by using different surveying methods. Results of the authors' surveys and related impacts were discussed.

The articles from this workshop provide an overview of the opportunities available to extension faculty and how to adapt to the rapidly changing needs of the nursery industry through increased collaboration and the use of all available resources and formats. The goal for these papers was to provide guidance to others who are extension professionals and wish to establish multistate, multidisciplinary, collaborative teams or looking to use new educational formats. Information was also shared on how to evaluate and successfully communicate the impact of disseminated extension resources.

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