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Identifying Assets Associated with Quality Extension Programming at the Local Level

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County Extension offices are responsible for the majority of programming delivered in the United States. The purpose of this study was to identify and explore assets influencing the quality of county Extension programs. A basic qualitative research design was followed to conduct constant comparative analysis of five Extension county program review reports. Using the appreciative inquiry process as the lens through which to view the county program review reports revealed multiple assets leading to quality programming. Assets of the reviewed county Extension programs were found to cluster within the following themes: competent and enthusiastic Extension faculty, community partnerships, engaged and supportive stakeholders, effective resource management, sufficient and stable workforce, meeting stakeholder needs, positive reputation, access to facilities, positive relationships between county and state faculty, and innovative practices. The use of both needs-based and assets-based paradigms will provide Extension organizations with a more holistic understanding of its assets and a research-based foundation from which to make decisions about strengthening the organization at all levels.

Keywords: appreciative inquiry, assets, capacity development

Introduction

A SWOT analysis is a popular approach for assessing the needs of an organization (Hill & Westbrook, 1997). In a SWOT analysis, one or more external parties examine the organization in order to determine its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (McLean, 2006). A problem that sometimes occurs when using the SWOT approach is an organization will not focus on all of the SWOT aspects equally (Menon, Bharadwaj, Adidam, & Edison, 1999), resulting in plans that do not reflect a holistic reality. For example, an organization may devote its efforts to addressing weaknesses and threats as opposed to strengths and opportunities.

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Such has been the case with the SWOT analyses conducted for the past seven years in Florida. Reviews of Extension programs at the county level occur annually. The county program reviews are used "to assess program quality, facilitate program improvement, foster cooperation among Extension's various units, and assist in achieving the best use of institutional resources" (Jacob, Israel, & Summerhill, 1998, para. 1). Among the outputs resulting from the reviews are reports generated by the review teams that follow an adaptation of the SWOT model; these reports identify the strengths, challenges, opportunities, and threats facing the entire county unit as well as individual program areas.

Annual surveys of county faculty who have participated in the reviews and formal reports submitted by County Extension Directors provide evidence that supports the effectiveness of the process in driving positive change (Harder & Strong, 2010). However, the trend has been for county faculty to focus on challenge areas and missed opportunities. Rarely, if ever, has a county response addressed plans to capitalize on their strengths as a means of enhancing programming capacity. Research published from the reviews (e.g., Harder, Lamm, & Strong, 2009; Harder, Moore, Mazurkewicz, & Benge, 2013) has similarly focused on needs instead of strengths. A missed opportunity exists to drive organizational change by building on assets instead of only trying to overcome weaknesses.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

In 1987, Cooperrider and Srivastva began to explore the need for appreciative inquiry. Appreciative inquiry posits that all organizations are never in a state of atrophy, meaning that all organizations at a given moment are functioning in some capacity. The process of appreciative inquiry requires the researcher to identify the functioning aspects of organizations in order to capitalize on those strengths and increase overall organizational health (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). It is within this framework that the study draws inspiration.

Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) found research of the time displayed an inherent disconnect between theory and practice. In their view, the problem-oriented research of the day had cast a dark cloud over the potential imagination-building possibilities of research. Cooperrider and Srivasta claimed organizations would thrive and cohesion between theory and practice would emerge if research would address positive aspects of organizations as the researcher played an active role in re-imagining possibilities for the organization. In order to accomplish this cohesion, the researcher must be actively involved in discourse, which will increase the production of an organization. Engagement of the researcher would entail researchers engaging in active theorizing with the organization in question. Positive attributes of organizational functions would emerge, and the researcher would then move towards persuasive theories that would help bring about continued organizational transformation (Cooperrider, Barrett, & Srivastva, 1995).

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Inclusive processes that bring together researchers and organizations in active theorizing highlight the unique methods of appreciative inquiry. By analyzing the positive aspects within an organization, researchers can inherently provoke continued imagination and capacity-building within organizations (Cooperrider et al., 1995). Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros (2003) described the appreciative inquiry model as having four phases. The phases are discovery, dream, design, and destiny. The phases create a cycle in which all members are engaged. The discovery phase is focused on engaging all stakeholders in identifying strengths within a specific system. The dream phase emphasizes problem-solving and capitalizing on strengths for future successes. The design phase is centered on creating vision for what the organization can become. The destiny phase involves strengthening the organization to meet its goals. In a study conducted by Kung, Giles, and Hagan (2013), the process of using appreciative inquiry as a course evaluation tool unveiled characteristics which were hidden in previous evaluation methods. In addition, the four phases of appreciative inquiry allowed the researchers and participants to formulate concrete steps to improve the program in the future.

In a study by Messerschmidt (2008), two programs in Nepal were evaluated using appreciative inquiry. Messerschmidt (2008) identified the promotion of positive thought and action-oriented processes as strengths to using appreciative inquiry to evaluate programs. In another study by Peelle (2006), appreciative inquiry was found to increase post-task group strength, meaning upon the completion of the appreciative inquiry process, groups were better able to implement change within organizations.

Conceptually, it is important to frame the idea of a program in order to determine which assets might contribute to quality Extension programming. Boyle (1981) defined a program as "the product resulting from all the programming activities in which the professional educator and learner are involved . . . it would include need analysis, planning, instruction, promotion, evaluation, and reporting" (p. 5). More recently, Boone, Safrit, and Jones (2002) expanded upon Boyle's definition by including the development of "a thorough understanding and commitment to the adult education organization's context" (p. 2) as an essential element of programming. Both definitions focus primarily on the *processes* of programming. It can be reasonably assumed quality Extension programming is the result of the successful application of these processes.

Individuals play several significant roles in establishing and maintaining the successful application of the processes of programming. Extension agents provide leadership for program planning, delivery, and evaluation in their counties and so have been described as "the heart and soul of Cooperative Extension" (Seevers & Graham, 2012, p. 50). Agents, also known in some states as county faculty, work with office support staff who also have "a vital function" (Seevers & Graham, 2012, p. 51) in supporting Extension programs. The quality of programs is also affected by stakeholder support and participation. Programs with greater amounts of stakeholder support experience higher success rates. Involved stakeholders help to promote programs

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throughout the community and provide constructive feedback to improve program quality (Beierle & Konisky, 2001; Boyle, 1981; Brandon, 1998). It is then evident Extension agents can affect program quality, which is likely to impact stakeholder participation and support.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore and identify factors influencing the quality of county Extension programs. Specifically, the objective of the study was to describe the assets of county Extension programs.

Methods

A basic qualitative research design (Merriam, 1998) was used for this study, a commonly used design for exploratory research. The final reports from county program reviews conducted from 2012 to 2014 ($N = 15$) were used as the primary sources of data. Each report was developed by a four-person review team, consisting of one county agent, one District Extension Director, one Extension program leader, and one state Extension specialist, all of whom were employed by UF/IFAS Extension and received training for conducting the reviews prior to their county visits. Each review lasted two or three days, depending upon the size of the county, during which time the review teams interviewed county staff, agents, stakeholders, and county government officials. These interviews provided the foundation for the review team to report what they observed to be strengths, challenges, opportunities, and threats associated with the programming offered by a county Extension office.

One county within each of the five Extension districts was selected by the District Extension Director to participate in the county program reviews. The counties selected in 2012 to 2014 employed from 5 to 14 faculty and staff members. The smallest county had a population of 14,050, while the largest county housed a population of 679,513 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). The ethnic/racial composite of the counties also varied. While all but one of the counties were predominantly white, considerable variance was observed for the percentages of people reporting Hispanic ethnicity (5-50%) and people reporting black or African American race (3-55%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Per capita income ranged from $13,590 to $36,836. Extension programs offered to the residents of the reviewed counties commonly included 4-H, agriculture, horticulture, and family and consumer sciences, but there were also sea grant programs and community resource development programs in some counties.

The reports generated as a result of the reviews were examined for accuracy by each county's Extension director; this served as a form of member checking to increase trustworthiness prior to data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314) is member checking. The trustworthiness of the

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data was also enhanced through the use of multiple investigators on each review team, resulting in the triangulation of data included in the reports (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Similarly, the review team obtained information from a variety of interviewed sources during the review.

Merriam (1998) recommended reporting researcher bias when discussing trustworthiness. The lead researcher has experience as an Extension agent and currently provides leadership for UF/IFAS Extension's professional development system. Consequently, this researcher tends to have a pro-agent bias. The supporting researcher has experience within the formal education system and international development but has never held a professional position in U.S. Extension; there exists a bias towards the value of education to build capacity. However, the supporting researcher's relative newness to working with UF/IFAS Extension helped balance any preconceived biases the lead researcher may have had.

As a qualitative study, this research is not intended to be generalized beyond the 15 counties that were reviewed; there are 67 counties in the state, and this study was not intended to be representative of them all. However, thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used when describing the counties and county offices reviewed to aid the reader in determining transferability to other Extension settings. Similarly, the extensive use of quotes in the findings adds to the thick description of the context.

The data were categorically divided by the authors using constant comparative analysis (Merriam, 1998). Within this qualitative analytical process, data are compared in order to draw out recurring themes, subthemes, and illustrative quotes. The process requires careful comparison between one section of data with another in order to draw out similarities. Consistent with the theoretical framework guiding the study (Cooperrider et al., 2003), the themes of interest within the analysis were those which captured the strengths of county programs in order to be consistent with the intent of the discovery phase of appreciative inquiry. An internal debriefing was conducted following the initial analysis to discuss the findings and develop the final interpretation of the data (Anzul, Ely, Freidman, Garner, & McCormack-Steinmetz, 2003; Messerschmidt, 2008; Peelle, 2006).

Each of the county reports was examined in order to identify evidence of assets contributing to quality Extension programming. The assets were then compiled and examined for similarities between different counties. These similarities were combined to create common themes of assets across all 15 counties.

Findings

The following assets were identified from the 15 county program review reports. Coding was used when including direct quotes from the reports. It is helpful to note multiple terms are used

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interchangeably within UF/IFAS Extension to describe Extension agents, including Extension faculty and county faculty.

Competent and Enthusiastic Extension Faculty

The central asset identified across all 15 counties was the competence and enthusiasm of Extension faculty. While other assets were present, the competence and enthusiasm of Extension faculty impacted a variety of areas throughout the counties which will be outlined in the following sections. Report 1 stated, "County faculty members are competent and enthusiastic about their work. The entire staff works well together, delivering multi-disciplinary programs in the community" (R1). The enthusiasm of faculty members was pivotal in the delivery of programs. Report 4 stated, "Faculty are well-trained and active in community outreach." Faculty worked together for shared goals, which in turn, enhanced program areas. Report 8 noted, "There is very little turn-over in this Extension office. Faculty and staff are experienced and work well as a cohesive team. It is evident that there is a positive social climate in this office." Cohesion among the faculty led to using a "team approach" (R9) to enrich program areas. The competence and enthusiasm of faculty members served to influence stakeholder attitudes as well: "They are highly competent and hardworking, and stakeholders noticed and appreciated this" (R5). The competence of county faculty also allowed "for a well-rounded perspective and a combination of established and fresh ideas" (R10). These ideas spread throughout various program areas and impacted their respective communities.

Community Partnerships

All counties in this study had evidence of positive partnerships with individuals and organizations within the community. Report 4 stated, "The connection to local public school foodservice personnel has been very important." The "strong partnerships" (R7) led to counties extending their services to reach underserved populations within their communities (R7, R11, R15). In Report 5, the forged partnerships created greater opportunities for program enlargement "for a wide variety of services." Programs with strong community partnerships were also using "interdisciplinary programs" (R13) to impact their counties. Working relationships with government agencies increased program effectiveness for different counties. In Report 2, a partnership with local area government allowed Extension to put "youth in front of decision makers" allowing the youth "a good learning experience." County faculty also sought out partnerships to help "provide science-based information to their constituents" (R9). These partnerships led to "multi-faceted" (R10) programs, which aligned with statewide goals.

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Engaged and Supportive Stakeholders

The counties reviewed in this study experienced high instances of stakeholder participation and engagement. These stakeholders not only participated in programs, they were also strong pillars of support within their communities. Report 1 stated the county government "is very supportive and Extension has engaged stakeholders." Various reports noted support from county government officials and departments, which led to greater recognition within their communities (R1, R7, R9, R10, R11, R12, R14, R15). In one county, this support led to the county government displaying concern for the agricultural community by "loosening rules and regulations that are cumbersome or unnecessary" (R7). One county government chose to express its support by paying "100% of the salaries of 4-H agents and program assistants" (R10).

The programs within county Extension offices also experienced high volumes of stakeholder support. The high volume of stakeholder participation positively impacted programs in these counties. Active and "diverse" (R9) advisory boards also helped in "identifying important issues" (R2) and "provided faculty with additional resources to develop and deliver program information" (R2). In Report 3, "enthusiastic stakeholder support was evident." This allowed the county's programming to have stable support (R3). The programs led by Extension were seen by stakeholders in a positive light. Stakeholders were said to "recognize the benefit and appreciate the relationship they had with [county] faculty and staff" (R8). Stakeholders were adamant in their support for county offices, stating, "Extension is the entity people come to in the county" (R9), and "Extension makes things happen" (R9).

Volunteers also helped to support faculty by "serving as receptionists until staff can be hired" (R7) also "making it possible for a very small professional staff to extend programs and resources to a wide range of program participants" (R13). Strong support from stakeholders helped to spread program awareness as "advisory members were willing to push FCS Tweets and Facebook postings to their networks if encouraged" (R2). Their support acted as a mouthpiece while "providing support of Extension to county government" (R11).

Effective Fiscal Management

Although evidence of budgetary restrictions was present, the counties within this study were able to allocate appropriate resources to increase program effectiveness. Grants allowed for expansion of programs in two counties (R1, R2). "Securing sponsorship support for Extension programs" (R3) also helped to enhance programs. Report 4 indicated the county made "attempts to increase external funding for programming." These attempts served to increase program effectiveness. The use of "private funding" (R10) helped to "support program areas" (R10). "Appropriate utilization of resources" (R2) in one county allowed them to use resources from "substandard programs" (R2) and apply them to improving program qualities in other areas.

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County offices used funding to support key positions within the faculty that promoted "visibility, importance and impact of Extension" (R6). County offices also used their funding to creatively support community needs, as was the case in Report 9 where the county incorporated the use of "4-H vehicles," eliminating the "common deterrent that limits participation of youth who may most need what 4-H has to offer." Effective fiscal management also led to the creation of "exceptionally high-quality program support materials" (R7). Programs in other counties were "self-sustaining" (R9) through various "cost recovery" (R12) methods helping them to continue programs in the future.

Sufficient and Stable Workforce

Among the strengths outlined for the counties, a sufficient and stable workforce served to enhance program delivery and function. "Added positions" (R4), "multiple agents" (R2), and "very little turnover" (R8) were listed among Extension program strengths. Limited turnover also allowed for a "positive environment" (R8) among the staff. In addition to the increase in program delivery staff, "positions that added "much needed secretarial and managerial help to the office" (R5) eased the workload of office management. While adding staff positions was beneficial, in one county the stability of the faculty with the 4-H program helped to "sustain the program in the community" (R3).

Meeting Stakeholder Needs

Another strength among the counties was the evidence of strategic programmatic planning that met stakeholder needs within their respective communities. In three counties, programming that met "an educational need" (R2) received positive feedback from both government and public areas of the community (R2, R4, R5). Faculty who were working with their advisory boards to plan future programs responded "with relevant programming" (R4). Relevant programming included "need-based education" (R6) for stakeholders and educating "the public and decision makers" (R8). These programs helped to bring more awareness to the agricultural industry within their communities.

Elements of program delivery also resonated among stakeholders. In Report 3, "hands-on classes and videos" helped to facilitate learning in a "way that clients find helpful." Faculty infused their programming with accurate and in-depth information to help educate their clientele (R10, R13, R14). Faculty responded to the needs of stakeholders by providing relevant programming such a bed-bug program (R10) or by changing delivery methods used to engage clients (R11, R12). In addition, one county cited their Spanish-speaking agents as an asset due to their ability to reach diverse populations in their programming (R15).

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Innovative Practices

Innovative practices within the counties resulted in positive reactions from stakeholders and could have "potential impact" (R2) for future programming. Extension faculty in two counties (R2, R3) initiated new programs that increased stakeholder and multi-county participation. Other counties implemented similar approaches and experienced positive returns. In Report 5, "the multi-county framework (agriculture and commercial horticulture) is used," and the reviewers found it to "work effectively."

While program initiatives were among the strengths found within innovative practices, unique marketing practices were among innovations that created positive outcomes. Three counties with Extension faculty using new marketing methods showed increased program participation (R3, R4, R5). The practices employed by some counties included newsletters, social media accounts, web pages, weekly newspaper columns, television airtime, and easy-to-read information guides (R6, R7, R8, R9, R10, R11). Evidence of county promotion of programs within the community allowed programs to become "more visible" (R2) to stakeholders. It also helped to increase attendance and recognition within these communities. Counties were able to use these various platforms to communicate successes throughout their areas and bring more attention from newer audiences and valued governmental officials (R6, R7).

Positive Reputation in the Community

Many counties displayed high instances of positive perceptions of faculty and program areas in their communities. One county report stated, "the overall Extension program had a reputation in Florida (and even nationally) for delivering cutting-edge Extension programming" (R6). Various faculty members also had positive reputations within their communities which led to strong support systems within Extension programming (R6, R9, R13). Respective program areas within these counties also had been recognized for their "quality and success" (R10). Uniquely, one county office had been known in its community for being a catalyst for change regarding "climate change issues" (R11) as it "facilitated community efforts" (R11). These counties garnered "deep support and respect among both stakeholders and officials" (R13).

Access to Facilities

Although facilities can sometimes become a hindrance to county programming, some county reports described faculty using the facilities available to their advantage. Faculty in one report used "farmers' markets for disseminating information available from Extension" (R7). Faculty in another county were able to use satellite offices within the county as well as county facilities in order to reach "a geographically and culturally diverse audience" (R10). Access to satellite offices in another county helped to provide "coverage to the unique, linear geography" (R11) of

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the county. Some counties had access to large facilities which helped to enrich programming with demonstration gardens and community garden plots (R6, R12, R15). These facilities were helpful in reaching more audiences and allowed for creative programming.

Positive Relationships Between Agents and Specialists

Relationships between agents and specialists were strengths within some counties. These relationships brought about powerful advances within programming in various counties (R8, R9, R12). In one county, evidence was cited of "a firm relationship between county faculty and specialists and that these relationships are extended to the clientele through research demonstrations and information sharing" (R8). Another county experienced an increase in trust, "relevance and credibility" (R9) by including specialists within program planning. It was noted in the review that as more faculty sought the help of specialists, they permitted "time for strong evaluations and follow through" (R12) since they were no longer "reinventing the wheel" (R12). The programs in which a strong partnership between faculty and specialists existed led to higher acceptance within counties and stronger support in their communities (R12).

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Using the appreciative inquiry process (Cooperrider & Srivasta, 1987) as the lens through which to view the county program review reports revealed multiple assets leading to quality programming and a resulting positive reputation for Extension within the community. Mapping the themes identified in the data analysis shows the importance of the quantity and quality of Extension professionals within the reviewed counties (see Figure 1). The reports noted positive impacts on programming were related to having a sufficient number of Extension professionals available to conduct the work of the county office. This included not only Extension faculty but also support staff whose contributions allow faculty the time to focus more on programming and less on other tasks. The critical value of both professional groups noted in this study matches the importance described by Seevers and Graham (2012).

As noted by Ensle (2005), job burnout is often related to the heavy workload of Extension faculty. Having offices staffed with a sufficient number of people increases the likelihood of having enthusiastic Extension faculty. People who enjoy their jobs are more likely to stay longer (Martin & Kaufman, 2013) and increased tenure is often associated with increased competence (Ng & Feldman, 2010; Quinones, Ford, & Teachout, 1995). A stable and competent Extension workforce contributes to positive relationships with state Extension specialists, advisory councils, other stakeholders, and community partners as noted in the findings. Conversely, Bradley, Driscoll, and Bardon (2012) noted the lack of a stable Extension workforce is commonly associated with a loss of community relationships. The support of community partners and stakeholders, through reported actions such as spreading awareness of UF/IFAS

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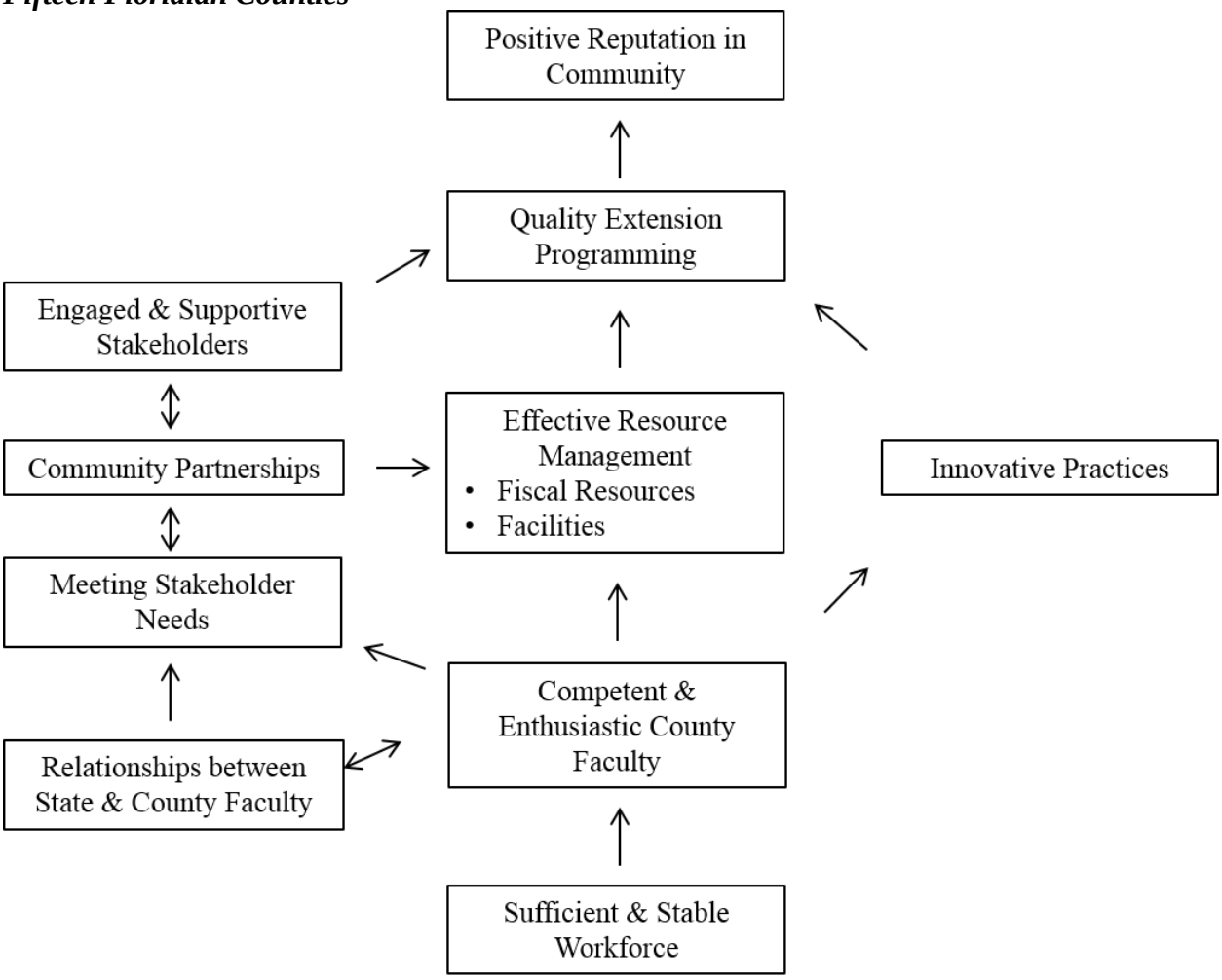
Extension through social media, positively contributes to quality Extension programming and the development of positive reputations. This conclusion is consistent with prior work by Beierle and Konisky (2001), Boyle (1981), and Brandon (1998).

Figure 1. Conceptualized Map of Assets Leading to Quality Extension Programming in Fifteen Floridian Counties



Effective resource management is another factor impacting quality Extension programming. The reports noted that Extension faculty proactively sought strategies to secure adequate resources to support programming despite the presence of budgetary restrictions. As depicted in Figure 1, some Extension faculty sought external support from community partnerships. Other faculty reallocated resources to the highest performing programs, a decision consistent with the philosophy of appreciative inquiry. Additionally, faculty were observed to effectively use available Extension facilities to serve clientele, but faculty also took advantage of other kinds of facilities (e.g. farmers' markets) to achieve their programming goals. Flexibility and creativity in resource management were found to be important assets contributing to quality programming.

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The final asset contributing to quality Extension programming noted in the reports was the use of innovative practices by Extension faculty. Innovative practices included alternative structures for organizing programs, such as multi-county frameworks, offering new programs, and innovative marketing methods to increase program participation. Again, innovation can be linked to the presence of competent and enthusiastic Extension faculty, further emphasizing the importance of their role in quality Extension programming.

The use of appreciative inquiry to frame the information gathered during county program reviews enabled the researchers to conceptualize how assets strengthen the capacity of the organization to conduct quality Extension programming in the counties studied (Cooperrider et al., 1995). Doing so provides a useful schematic that can be used to develop an assets-based strategy for further strengthening the counties' capacities to provide quality Extension programming. Based on the results of this study, organizational resources in the reviewed counties should be directed on a priority basis to (a) ensuring there is a sufficient and stable workforce, (b) enhancing the competence of that workforce through professional development, and (c) supporting and expanding program budgets. It may be beneficial to continue through the remaining three phases of appreciative inquiry to create the most positive and significant impact on the organization.

The recommendation to support program budgets as the lowest of the three priorities is made cautiously on the basis of evidence that suggests competent Extension faculty find funds and additional resources to support their programming, particularly through community partnerships. However, there is likely a point of diminishing returns where too much time spent seeking external resources leads to lower quality Extension programs as a faculty member has less time to spend on other programming responsibilities. Further, Ensle (2005) noted "most agents have little training in grants writing or contract negotiation" ("Defining burnout," para. 5). UF/IFAS Extension does provide periodic trainings for its county faculty in these areas, but it is unclear if faculty successfully sought external funding because they were trained to do so, out of necessity, or simply on their own initiative. Moving forward, the county program review teams should seek to answer this question.

Future research should include the use of appreciative inquiry to examine the assets of UF/IFAS Extension, although additional studies are needed to determine if the assets-based approach is superior to the needs-based approach for producing measurable changes in organizational capacity. Qualitative research conducted in other counties may provide additional insight into the assets that contribute to quality Extension programming. A more comprehensive understanding of assets could provide a useful foundation for conducting larger quantitative surveys of assets within county Extension offices. It would also be valuable to investigate how assets at the state level relate to the delivery of quality Extension programming at the county level. The use of both paradigms will provide UF/IFAS Extension with a more holistic

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understanding of its assets and a research-based foundation from which to make decisions about strengthening the organization at all levels.

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