

## WRITING PROGRAM SUCCESS STORIES

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### Introduction

The satisfaction that is obtained from observing direct success among our clients or community as a result of our Extension program efforts is most gratifying. These successes may take many forms and may be focused on a single individual, group, or larger population. However, the underlying theme in any success story is the positive impact on an individual or society that occurred as a result of our program efforts.

### Success

The dictionary defines success as "... favorable termination of a venture...the degree or measure of attaining a desired end...an undertaking that succeeds or confers success...succeeding fully or in accordance with one's desires"(Babcock, 1993). Interviews with numerous Extension professionals indicates that success is seen in many forms. However, for a success story to convey significant success, actions by clients or impacts on clients should be indicated. These actions may indicate practice adoption or changed behaviors. Impacts may be indicated as financial gains; taxpayer savings; efficiencies gained; environmental enhancements or protection; individual life enhancements; resources preserved; or societal improvements. One county director stated that program success is "choosing to do the right things well, and achieving measurable results from doing our programs that meet the needs of people"(Baker, et.al., 1995).

### Developing Success Stories

It is clear that success can be interpreted in many ways, but in each description, success could be stated as a positive impact that occurred as a result of Extension educational program efforts. This positive impact may be social, environmental, or economic terms, but should be easily recognizable and understood as a positive result of Extension's program or programs. Thus, in identifying and reporting such positive program impacts, some general guidelines should be kept in mind. When developing a success story, conciseness, brevity, informative, focused, and impact oriented should be the guiding principles. A success story should include a very brief description of the problem; the educational program response; the participants; other partners (if applicable); and program impact or participant response; plus a conclusion. The participant response may be stated as a testimonial if available.

Success Stories should be written to communicate program impacts to lay audiences who may not be readily familiar with Cooperative Extension programs. In understanding this key factor, program acronyms should generally be avoided or at least explained. Also, it is important to think about the message that is really being conveyed by the success story. Inadequate or inappropriate statement of the problem can give the reader mistaken impressions as to why the program was undertaken or what prompted the initiative to begin with. It is also very easy to convey the impression that we were sitting idly by waiting for a problem to arise rather than conveying the image that we were educating to prevent problems and to produce positive program results. Conveyance of the message that Cooperative Extension is making a difference in people's lives in a positive manner with demonstrated impacts should be the intended purpose of writing a success story. In the following example of a success story, each of the key components will be identified:

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#### *Heart Healthy Program Successful*

Heart disease is the number 1 killer in Robeson County [**Problem**]. Cooperative Extension in cooperation with local hospital and Health Dept. [**Partners**] sponsors quarterly "heart healthy" cooking workshops for the general public. Emphasis is on health recipes and cooking techniques participants can use in their daily lives [**Program**]. 49 consumers participated in the three workshops [**People**]. Participants were surveyed several weeks following classes, and 73% indicated they had used class recipes or modified their own recipes to reduce fat, sodium, or sugar. According to the JADA (1996), nutrition intervention saves on average \$8000 per patient. Thus, for the small group surveyed there was a savings of \$64000 [**Impact**]. Due to interest of participants, workshops will continue quarterly [**Conclusion**].

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In telling the story of this real program success, the writer chose to state the problem and then the partners. Of course, every program does not always have a partner. In such a case, the writer would not need to list one. Also, the concluding sentence may be omitted if space is limited or the impact statement adequately explains the success.

It is imperative, though, to always include a statement of the problem, the Cooperative Extension program, the people it serves and its actual impact. Program success should focus on the entire educational program rather than on a single activity. Success should be demonstrated by actual outcomes, meaning actions taken, rather than intended outcomes or in educational gains of clients. That the information was actually used to make a positive difference should be indicated. Happiness about an activity or statements of intentions to change are not sufficient to indicate a program success story.

### **Success Story Examples**

The following examples are actual success stories from recent accomplishment reports (NCCES, 1997-98), that have been written to include information that clearly communicates positive program results.

#### ***Reduced Cotton Tillage Program Produces Savings***

Problems with wind and sand injury on cotton in the spring has resulted in Cooperative Extension focusing educational programs on reduced tillage farming methods. Acres of reduced tillage in Bertie County has increased from 500 to 20,000 in 1997. Most farmers are strip tilling, using hooded sprayers and never cultivating the cotton. Educational programs and farm visits have assisted farmers in equipment selection adjustments, along with herbicide selection and rates. Results have been the use of less herbicides, reduced tillage trips, savings on land preparation time in the spring, reduced cultivations, better weed control, increase in organic matter and better stands with no wind damage. All these have resulted in a \$487,500 savings to the County's farmers.

#### ***4-H Career Program Makes a Difference***

Many high school students do not have the opportunity to see first hand what is involved in a career of their choice. Wayne County 4-H collaborated with a civic club to conduct a shadowing program in which 102 high school students experienced a day with an adult in a career of their choice. The day ended with a luncheon to honor the students and recognized the adult volunteers. Each student had to write an essay about their experience and included remarks such as: "This day has helped me decide what I want to go to college for". Another student commented, "Through the 4-H career program I learned that what I thought I wanted as a career was not really for me. This program helped me see this before I invested my time in college preparing for a career."

#### ***4-H Program Credited With Success of Child***

A 13 year old Forsyth County 4-H'er was selected to represent 800 students from her middle school at a prestigious County wide Human Relations Banquet. In a letter from her parents, the Forsyth County Cooperative Extension 4-H program was given credit for allowing her to shine in the interview/selection process by stating: "... (Her) success comes partially from the skills and values she is taught from school teachers, coaches and parents. However, we attribute (her) ability to really SHINE from the following opportunities in 4-H: Camps, Exchange programs, International programs, public speaking, project records, 4-H congress, leadership training, presentations and district and county meetings. Without these opportunities...her talents would have taken many more years to be noticed." The growth of this one 4-H member is an indication of the true impact 4-H can have on developing life skills and responsible adults for our future.

#### ***Plastic Waste Collection Program a Success***

Each year thousands of ornamental plants are planted into Guilford county landscapes. The result is a stock pile of plastic nursery pots. Unfortunately these pots are not included in the current city recycling program. They are frequently disposed of through the county landfill. To prevent this a Recycling program was established by Cooperative Extension, with the cooperation of Plastics Revolutions, a recycling company which handles this type plastic. Television spots were conducted as well as newspaper articles published to alert people to handle these pots in a more environmentally friendly manner by means of a one day collection program. There were 5,500 lbs. of plastic collected which will be used to make new nursery pots and parking car stops. There were also 300 lbs collected which will be reused by backyard propagators for producing landscape plants.

### ***Pesticide Container Recycling Program Saves Landfill Space***

Used pesticide containers can be a major environmental hazard. In order to assure that farmers and others properly dispose of such containers, the Caldwell County Extension Center is in its second year of conducting a pesticide container recycling program. This year, two educational programs were held to educate producers on the proper methods of recycling containers. Of the 128 that attended, 120 stated they will or are taking part in the program. So far this year, the program has resulted in the recycling of 700 two and one-half gallon containers, 100 five gallon containers and 6 fifty-five gallon drums. This has saved the county approximately 1150 square feet of landfill space. At \$17.50/sq foot, the resulting savings is more than \$20,000.00 for landfill space alone.

### ***Family Budgeting Program Stimulates Action***

Moving families off of welfare to work is a goal of Forsyth County. The Cooperative Extension Service partnered with DSS, Goodwill Industries, and the JobLink Center to educate young mothers so they can improve their financial status. Classes were held at Goodwill Industries focusing on basic budgeting for parents who will be entering the work force. Two hundred participants increased knowledge of the family budgeting process as a means for developing a budget to fit their family's needs. At the end of the series, 150 limited resource participants stated they were now making a budget which is helping them to prioritize their bills and start paying bills on time, which will improve their credit record as well.

### ***Weed Control Program Increases Profits***

Many species of weeds have developed resistance to commonly used pesticides in Scotland County. New technology has enabled farmers to control weeds that were previously impossible to manage with currently available herbicides. As a result of Cooperative Extension meetings, newsletters, and consultations with growers, many were able to increase their net profit, and reduce the amounts of conventional herbicides applied. One grower increased his yield over 100 pounds per acre as a result of utilizing this new technology and following Extension recommendations. This resulted in increased net profits of \$105,000 for his operation alone. This use of new technologies in weed control greatly reduces the use of more conventional pesticides that are more likely to move through the soil and contaminate groundwater.

### ***Sawmill Efficiency Program Increases Income***

There is a great need to increase the competitiveness and profitability of North Carolina's forest products industry. Extension programs focused on educational and technical assistance to North Carolina forest products manufacturers resulted in one sawmill operation making modifications to their dispatch system. The results reported by this one mill indicated a production gain of 10,000 board feet of lumber per day or increased income of \$300,000 per year. While the entire wood products industry is served by Wood Products Extension, this one example is indicative of the many impacts accruing as a result of useful educational opportunities being provided in a timely and inclusive manner.

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