

Post-Pandemic Extension Needs of Floridians

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Introduction

From 2020 to 2022, the U.S. experienced a global pandemic and its impacts on health, the economy, and socialization. Society has been profoundly impacted and the consequences on human values and behaviors are of interest to a variety of fields, including sustainable development (Echegary, 2021), tourism (Everingham & Chassagne, 2020), and business (Anker, 2021). As an organization whose mission is focused on addressing the needs of individuals, families, and communities, UF/IFAS Extension also has a vested interest in assessing whether the pandemic impacted Floridians' perceptions of what is important to them. Past efforts to identify Floridians' needs found they prioritized protecting water quality, protecting freshwater resources, protecting air quality, and ensuring safe food handling practices to prevent foodborne illnesses (UF/IFAS Program Development & Evaluation Center, 2020). Our study was conducted to determine if UF/IFAS Extension should continue to focus its programs on the same priorities or whether new priorities had emerged for Floridians following a tumultuous time. The results contribute to enhancing the efforts of Extension, specifically, and agricultural education broadly, to solve complex, interdisciplinary problems (Roberts et al., 2016).

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

Needs can be identified based upon three levels (Altschuld & Kumar, 2010; Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). Level 1 needs refer to the receivers of a service and their needs. Level 2 needs include the service providers, such as employees or administrators. Level 3 needs encompass system resources, such as buildings, equipment, or programs. Each of the levels are interrelated, relying on one another to function (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). However, Altschuld and Kumar (2010) asserted "the needs of Level 1 should always be prime in the needs assessment process" (p. 23).

Methodology

We followed a three-phase plan to assess Level 1 needs in this study (Altschuld & Kumar, 2010; Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). The pre-assessment phase focused on uncovering needs already identified within the target audience. Information gathered in this exploratory stage aided the researchers in setting boundaries for the study. In the assessment phase, data were collected from the target audience and analyzed for emergent topics and themes. The final phase, post-assessment, will use the results of the study to create change and find solutions.

We conducted a non-experimental study of Floridians in 2022 using an online survey hosted by Qualtrics and distributed through Twitter, Facebook, and websites run by UF/IFAS and UF/IFAS Extension. A longer version of our survey instrument was used previously in 2020 (Harder et al., 2021). We replicated the priority issues section of that survey in our study; demographic questions were also asked of respondents. Questions asked respondents to indicate how much effort they thought UF/IFAS Extension should apply to various issues using five response options (1 = *No effort*, 2 = *Low effort*, 3 = *Moderate effort*, 4 = *High effort*, 5 = *Very high effort*).

There were 425 responses received in May and June; 112 responses were discarded after applying criteria designed to flag fraudulent (e.g., speeders, straightlining, potential bot), non-resident, and partial responses, leaving 313 usable responses. The high scrub rate was similar to the 2020 needs assessment (Harder et al., 2021). Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic coding of responses to an open-ended question that asked participants to describe the most pressing issue for UF/IFAS Extension issue to address.

Findings

The following issues were reported as needing *high effort* or *very high effort* by more than 70% of participants: protecting water quality (89.7%); protecting freshwater resources (88.2%); protecting natural habitats and ecosystems (88.2%); protecting the coastal environment (83.1%); controlling invasive plants (82.8%); strengthening the local food system (82.1%); controlling invasive pests (81.1%); protecting the marine environment (77.6%); composting, reducing, and recycling consumer goods (73.5%); reducing saltwater intrusion (71.5%); assisting local government with land use decisions (71.2%); and protecting air quality (70.6%). In comparison, several issues were reported as needing *no effort* or *low effort* by more than 50% of participants, including addressing illegal drug abuse (57.8%); addressing alcohol abuse (56.6%); addressing prescription drug abuse (56.2%); and strengthening couple and/or marital relationships (54.0%).

Participants expressed similar priorities in their open-ended responses. The statements were categorized into the following themes: environmental issues, agricultural processes, personnel in UF/IFAS, community engagement, population growth, education, and personal health and wellness. One participant wrote: “Water quality and sea level rise – these issues are critical to our state. We need to figure out how to protect our water and water supply, and how to protect our coastal areas from sea level rise.” Another participant identified invasive species as a pressing issue: “Invasive plants and animals are destroying our natural resources/habitats.” Few participants prioritized personal health and wellness compared to the frequency of responses corresponding to the other themes. One of those participants stated it was a priority for Extension to teach “homeowners healthy eating habits to reduce illness.”

Conclusions

Despite the impacts of the pandemic, survey respondents continued to have stable views of the priorities for which they felt UF/IFAS Extension should apply the most effort. The use of a non-randomized sample means the views expressed may not be generalizable to all Floridians, but similarity was observed for the most agreed upon issues when compared with 2020 results. Protecting water quality repeated its performance as the leading priority for UF/IFAS Extension’s efforts, consistent with the prior assessment of Floridians (UF/IFAS Program Development & Evaluation Center, 2020). Similarly, the issues for which respondents wanted UF/IFAS Extension to apply high or very high efforts tended to be thematically categorized as natural resources issues or safe and healthy food systems as they were in the 2020 assessment.

Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession

Altschuld and Kumar (2010) said “organizations, agencies, and business are there to resolve the needs of Level 1” (p. 23). Following a review of the data, the programmatic teams can create and provide content focused on the Level 1 priority needs. Further, agents can be supported in their efforts through additional in-service training opportunities facilitated by Extension state specialists. The findings of this study may lead to Extension addressing these issues more effectively. While our study focused on one state, the methods may be replicated by other states to provide a contemporary view of national needs following the COVID-19 pandemic.

References

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