

A Needs Assessment Framework to Strengthen Extension Program Delivery

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Introduction & Need for Innovation

Extension agents serve as both technical experts and educators, yet many enter the profession with limited preparation in pedagogy, andragogy, and program delivery (Harder et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2024). Although Extension's mission emphasizes non-formal education and community capacity building (Christenson & Robinson, 1989), research consistently identifies gaps in agents' teaching competencies, cultural responsiveness, and facilitation skills (Frawley et al., 2020). Existing needs assessment tools often focus on technical expertise rather than the instructional competencies required for effective program delivery. This project introduces an innovative, theory-driven needs assessment framework designed to identify Extension agents' teaching competency needs and strengthen their capacity as educators.

How it Works

The framework was developed through a comprehensive synthesis of Extension competency literature, adult learning theory, and community development models. Foundational needs assessment approaches, including Borich's (1980) gap analysis model and the Needs Resolution Model (Harder et al., 2009), guided the structure of the assessment. Adult learning principles emphasizing self-direction, relevance, and experiential learning (Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Bierema, 2014) informed the instructional competencies domains. Cultural competence frameworks (Frawley et al., 2020) and community development theory (Flora & Flora, 2013; Kenny et al., 2017) shaped indicators related to contextual awareness and inclusive program delivery.

The resulting process includes:

- Competency domains (teaching methods, facilitation, cultural competence, evaluation) grounded in Extension literature (Harder, 2014; Roberts et al., 2024).
- Question banks and rating scales aligned with Extension contexts and adult learning principles.
- Guidance for integrating stakeholder input, consistent with participatory approaches to needs assessment (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995; Boyle, 1981).

Implications

The framework provides a replicable, research-aligned process for diagnosing instructional competency gaps and aligning program delivery with Extension's educational mission. Literature synthesis indicates that strengthening competencies in teaching, cultural responsiveness, and facilitation directly supports program quality, job satisfaction, and retention (Harder et al., 2014). Early review suggests that the process enhances clarity around teaching expectations and supports more culturally responsive, learner-centered programming, an emerging priority across

Extension systems (Campbell, 2024; Harden et al., 2020). Currently, the researchers are in the process of developing the survey instrument based on a comprehensive review of the literature.

Future Plans

Future work includes a review by a panel of experts comprising Extension Program Development and education experts, pilot testing the framework with Extension agents, refining competency indicators based on practitioner feedback, and data collection. Practitioners implementing this process should engage stakeholders early, adapt tools to local cultural contexts, and use mixed-methods data to capture both measurable needs and community narratives (Frawley et al., 2020).

Based on the findings of this study, existing professional development structures, including the Extension Faculty Development Academy for new agents, Transformative Teaching in Extension for early career agents, and ongoing in-service training, can be strategically adapted to better address agents' teaching competency and program delivery needs.

Resources needed

Implementation requires minimal resources: facilitator time, access to survey or focus group tools, and optional printing of templates. The framework is intentionally designed to be low-cost, scalable, and adaptable across program areas.

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