

Bringing Structure to Complexity: Applying the TOP Model Across Four USDA Programs

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Introduction

- USDA has funded multiple higher-education grant programs to address workforce shortages
- Evaluation across these programs is inconsistent/fragmented — no shared measures
- This makes accountability and cross-program comparison hard
- TOP model offers a structured framework to fix this — this study applies it across 4 USDA programs

Methods

Logic models developed

mapped to TOP Levels 2–5

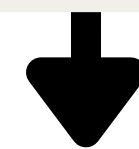
instruments built (Qualtrics surveys)

validated by expert panel

interviews/focus groups

inductive coding in MaxQDA

themes refined by team



TOP Model Levels

*Levels 2–5 capture implementation and short-term outcomes
— the focus of this study.*



References and Abstract QR Code

Rockwell, K., & Bennett, C. (2004). Targeting outcomes of programs: A hierarchy for targeting outcomes and evaluating their achievement. University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension.

United States Department of Agriculture, National Institute of Food and Agriculture. (n.d.). Workforce development. <https://www.nifa.usda.gov/topics/workforce-development>

United States Government Accountability Office. (2017). Education: Improved performance measures needed to assess effectiveness of federal programs (Report No. GAO-17-400). <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-17-400>



Results

1. **Consistent structure** — Shared TOP language enabled cross-program alignment despite differing goals
2. **Clarified priorities** — Operationalizing levels exposed documentation gaps, especially in less-defined programs
3. **Standardized data collection** — Parallel instruments across programs, less evaluator burden

Conclusions

TOP is a practical, adaptable framework for evaluating multiple higher-education grant programs.

- Unifies multi-program evaluation, improving comparability and communication
- Strengthens logic models when integrated during program planning
- Standardizes instruments while reducing redundancy and evaluator burden



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