

# Organizing Extension Family and Consumer Sciences Groups Around a Common Topic: Lessons Learned and Best Practices

For over 100 years, Extension and land-grant universities have been providing researched-based, practical information to individuals and families in local communities. The changing environment within the Extension Service and the communities they serve have created a need for networking beyond state boundaries. Using an established regional Extension network, this study interviewed its members to uncover successes and challenges of combining resources across states and universities. The interviews' resulting themes showed that regional networks meet their communication and sustainability challenges while making a greater impact on Extension programming by sharing resources and evaluation efforts.

## BEST PRACTICES

### *Julie Garden-Robinson, Rebecca West, Shannon Coleman, Barbara Ingham, Joyce McGarry, and Londa Nwadike*



In 2016, the North Central Region (NCR) Extension program leaders in Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) convened state specialists and field staff in Chicago, Illinois. The NCR includes twelve states (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin). Groups within the region were organized around key FCS topics, including food safety, aging, and several others. One group organized around consumer food safety education with a focus on home food preservation. The food safety group eventually developed a standardized evaluation tool (Garden-Robinson et al., 2019). In

2020, the consumer food safety education group officially adopted the name: North Central Food Safety Extension Network (NCFSEN), after the current study took place.

Extension professionals often are tasked with an ever-increasing need for research-based information with decreasing resources. To maximize the effect of Extension programs and allow for sharing of material across state lines, organizing into professional communities is a viable solution. According to Young (2018) of Utah State University, “[t]he new norm for extension [sic] includes smaller

budgets, fewer individuals tasked with greater job duties, and rapidly changing clientele wants and needs” (p. 281). This “new norm” has evolved into the dissolution of geographical boundaries to meet these rapidly changing needs, especially in lieu of the current pandemic and its impact on food safety issues.

Research of Extension Professional Associations, or EPAs (Thomas et. al, 2018), showed how formal, professional-development-based groups operate and what we can learn from them. Some of the common themes that came out of this qualitative study were strong “networking and connection” as well as “value,” “motivation,” and “recruitment” (pp. 1-2). Further, a multi-university Extension program utilized in the Gulf of Mexico states responded to clients' questions after the Deepwater Horizon Spill (Sempier et. al, 2018). The program team used peer-reviewed research results and an Extension specialist from each of the four universities involved in their institution’s Sea Grant programs. The grant specifically outlined the “spectrum of oil spill-related topics, allowing for delivery of multidisciplinary Extension programming” (p. 2).

Finally, a report from the University of Minnesota highlighted how Extension professionals use “the art and science of networking” to reach expanded audiences by developing leaders and facilitators. The authors of the Minnesota report emphasize how networking is poised to function more expediently in the future, involving the Internet and social media platforms already well established (Harden et al., 2020). The literature reviewed exemplifies the exponential power of combining resources across state and university lines. More research is needed to understand the potential of regional networks in sustaining and

growing Extension's mission.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to use the experience of a regional Extension consumer food safety education network to explore the nature and operation of a collaborative, regional Extension network. Our objectives were 1) to achieve an in-depth understanding of the successes and roadblocks that members of a network may encounter, and 2) to uncover nuanced responses that might inform other Extension professionals how to establish their own networks using best practices.

## METHOD

A qualitative study was conducted using an interpretivist paradigm to understand the Network members' perceptions and experiences (Ulin, et al., 2005). Using personal interviews was the most convenient and appropriate method chosen considering the small number of potential participants (less than 20). An Extension assistant, who was at the time unknown to the Network members, was employed to help develop questions and conduct the interviews. The protocol was determined to be exempt according to North Dakota State University's Institutional Review Board office, Protocol #HE20266.

Interview questions were organized into six logical categories using standardized, open-ended questions, which allowed for more flexible responses while reducing interviewer bias (Ulin et al., 2005). These standardized questions were informed by a previous study done by another NCR network focused on the topic of aging (Bates, et al., 2020). The first three of six question categories dealt with the background of Network members (Professional Development), target audience and program format (Program Development), and the effects of these first two categories (Program Impact). Each question category was divided into three sub-categories. These sets of questions and their sub-categories allowed the interviewer to probe Network members' backgrounds and experiences. They could be thought of as 'where we've been' (see Table 1, first and second columns).

The last three of six question categories elicited information about audience interests (Food Safety

Topics), how the Network communicates and makes decisions (Communication), and how members currently sustain the Network and operate moving forward (Change). Within these question categories were two sub-categories. These sets of questions and their sub-categories represented the current state of affairs and possibilities for the future and could be thought of as 'where we're going' (see Table 2, first and second columns). Overall comments were elicited at the end of the interview and are represented in the data as Extras/Final Comments (see Table 2, bottom). Although the questions were scripted, they were asked in the manner of conversational dialogue. The questions were sometimes asked verbatim and sometimes modified slightly to elicit responses and facilitate communication between interviewer and participant (participant=Network member).

The Network's email list provided the pool of potential participants. Invitations and scheduling were completed using the privacy setting on Doodle. Out of 17 members (at the time, more have since joined), 11 volunteered to be interviewed. At a 65% sample, we believe this was representative because the most active members were interviewed. Network members ranged from new Extension specialists and educators to highly experienced Extension professionals, some nearing retirement. Interviews were conducted and recorded over Zoom during two weeks in June 2020 and ranged from 27 to 52 minutes in length. Recordings were downloaded and transcribed using iTunes.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The Extension assistant completed the coding of responses using the identification of common themes, then developing simple phrases to represent them as they appeared throughout the transcripts (Ulin et al., 2005). Two response themes emerged that were not a part of the initial question categories, and these were coded separately as Points of Interest (POIs) (see Table 2, bottom). Codes were triangulated with an outsourced assistant, then tabulated.



## RESULTS

Three to five response themes emerged within each of the question categories and sub-categories of 'Where We've Been' and 'Where We're Going' (see Tables 1 and 2, third columns). The following results and discussion are organized around the major question categories with a description of how the transcripts resulted in the response themes. Sample quotes pulled from the data are provided as examples.

### PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The first question category, Professional Development, contained three sub-categories: Motivation, Impact, and Mentoring. Out of the responses coded in Motivation, three response themes emerged: helping others, personal fulfillment, and overcoming ignorance. These three themes were developed from individual coded phrases within the interview transcripts. For example, from the 'helping others' response theme, the variety of answers given by participants were coded within the transcripts using the following phrases: facilitating safe food for all, helping colleagues perform better, helping clients directly, sharing a passion with others, preventing people from getting sick, improving health, and more. From the 'personal fulfillment' response theme, some of the coded phrases were: job description, personal health impact, personal satisfaction, personal passion, lifelong interest/involvement, and more. From the 'overcoming ignorance' response theme, some of the example phrases coded were: home v. business food safety, medical diagnosis and diet, the "I'm still alive" syndrome, canning without previous preparation, the Internet, and more. These detailed coded phrases are just one example taken from the first question sub-category of Motivation.

The coded phrases that resulted in the response themes in the third column of Tables 1 and 2 were developed from the variety of descriptions given by participants. To exemplify the richness of responses, some quotes that correlate with the response themes above are given here to illustrate. From the code phrase 'safe food for all' in the 'helping others' response theme above, a quote was: "just to help them to have safe food for themselves and their family." From the code phrase 'personal passion' in the 'personal fulfillment' response theme, a quote was: "I've always had a real strong passion and desire to make sure that folks know what they are doing [and] how they're doing it is the right way, because it could be a matter of life or death." From the code phrase "I'm still alive" syndrome

in the 'overcoming ignorance' response theme, a quote was: "So I think now all the [moms] out there in the world who have this opinion that 'I haven't hurt anybody...this works; it's easier than what you're telling me to do.'"

In the Impact sub-category, the response theme of working together, three code phrases found in the data stood out: networking, sharing resources, and problem-solving. The response theme of 'results achieved' emerged from the code phrases national award and evaluation tool. In the Mentoring sub-category, the response theme of 'mutual mentorship' emerged from code phrases including: shared mentorship, mutual collaboration, and mutual mentorship going both ways. Some participants indicated a need for mentorship by such quotes as "need mentorship for new people" and "need for mentorship for those who don't have it at state level."

### PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND IMPACT

The Program Development question category had the sub-category of Audiences, their Problems, and Solutions applied, as shown in the second column of Table 1. The Program Impact question category yielded many comments about the evaluation tool (Garden-Robinson et al., 2019) that the NCR Food Safety Team (the Network's name at the time) developed and implemented in the Assessment (sub-category) of their programs. The State Impact sub-category elicited how the team's work impacted the individual members' state-level programs since it was formed.

The previous three question categories, taken together, show 'where we've been' on the Professional Development of individual members, and the Program Development and Impact of the work they've accomplished to date. As shown in Table 2, interviews then explored 'where we're going' through Food Safety Topics, Communication and Change as the Network positions itself to the future.

### FOOD SAFETY TOPICS

In the Food Safety Topics question category, interviewees revealed their Biggest Issue in food safety along with New Topics to be explored as well as the Role team members would like to play in developing those topics. As may be expected, COVID was coded for many of the answers. 'Overcoming ignorance' was also frequently found as a response theme, corresponding to coded phrases such as Internet, family and friends' influence, always done it that way, and education/equipment in the transcribed interviews.

## COMMUNICATION

The Communication question category delivered response themes in the sub-categories of Decision-Making and Improving Communication. Response themes in making decisions for the team included 'general - why the team works' and 'specific actions employed.' Some of the coded phrases from this set of data were: automatic consensus, group is voluntary, diplomacy, consideration of others, and mutual respect. Collaborative problem solving, a commonly coded phrase in Professional Development/Impact (Table 1), also appeared frequently in the Decision-Making question topic. Some of the 'specific actions employed' had coded phrases: monthly meetings, use of agenda, and smaller breakout groups. In the Improving Communication sub-category, response themes were for 'what works,' 'what needs work,' and 'no improvements needed.' "Continued leadership that encourages participation" and "don't force advice" were some shorter quotes, and "getting to know each other better," "learning names and backgrounds," "having less verbal people do more talking," "don't have rolling agenda items," and "get a secretary," were quote fragments for areas of improvement.

## CHANGE

In the Change question category, sub-category Longevity, response themes emerged dealing with how long team members think the group will last and why, with answers falling into the response themes of 'changing membership' and 'cautions and needs.' For example, some coded phrases were: replace retirees and open membership, Network members need stronger roles, not using talented membership effectively, revolving leadership needed, and refocus topics. The Goals/Planning sub-category aimed at finding out if the team had goals and if they needed a strategic plan.

Some responses had general ideas about change, and some had specific action items; there were varying opinions on whether or not a strategic plan was needed. Examples of coded phrases from the data included: share information and education topics don't change with time, and in the case of strategic planning (SP), coded phrases and quotes revealed "SP yes, for ongoing leadership and financial sustainability;" and "SP yes with caution: takes a lot of work, and time away from practical work that is intrinsic to Extension professionals;" while at the same time coded phrases and quotes appeared stating "SP no, too formal; informality creates group cohesiveness;" and "SP no; wastes time in development and implementation, if

implementation ever happens;" with one "SP maybe; we're already doing quite well without one."

## EXTRAS

Finally, the Extras question category yielded basic Final Comments that were summaries or re-emphasizing points made earlier in the interview. The POIs emerged as response themes that stood on their own, outside of where they appeared in the transcribed interviews. The first POI pertains to organizational obstacles and emerged from the following coded phrases: new hires have a wide variety of expertise, so may not perform to expectations; lack of administrative support; and radical restructuring of state Extension programs (cuts). Others noted that over the last ten years new hires have less and less food preservation experience, fewer Extension agents that have a good food science background, and most have only nutrition backgrounds. Some participants noted obstacles created by the current level of funding, amount of time currently available from the National Center for Home Food Preservation, and a need at their state level to utilize their Extension personnel in a more focused way (such as having one person focused on food preservation) instead of all personnel touching on all topic areas. The other POI response theme pertained to the trend of other professional organizations tending to tap Network members for information or referral; for example, one answer reflected that Poison Control refers some of their questions to Network members for authoritative answers.

## DISCUSSION

Consumer food safety and home food preservation information developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture has been disseminated in communities for more than 100 years (National Center for Home Food Preservation, n.d.). Fostering networks that extend beyond county and state lines can enhance Extension's visibility and foster a greater impact. This qualitative evaluation of a regional team's successful food safety efforts highlighted the value of a network that stretched beyond state boundaries, and it provides original research on which other Extension groups might form new networks and provide future research on professional collaboration. Analysis revealed common themes that have served as the "glue" holding the network together. Helping others, working on general and specific initiatives in Extension priority areas, enacting shared decision-making, having regular communication, fostering mutual mentorship, and creating evaluation tools to showcase state and regional impacts are highlights of this five-year network.



## CONTACT INFORMATION

Julie Garden-Robinson  
NDSU Extension Service and Department of Health,  
Nutrition and Exercise Sciences  
North Dakota State University  
E. Morrow Lebedeff Hall 316  
Fargo, ND, 58108-6050  
julie.garden-robinson@ndsu.edu



You may click here to access the references, tables, and graphs for this article.

*Authors of this article, except for Rebecca West, were some of the interviewees in the study and their responses were included in the data collection. Triangulation of data was performed by outsourced assistant Pamela Leino-Mills, whom we gratefully acknowledge.*

NEAFCS 2022 Awards  
Application Portal is  
**OPEN** until **March**  
**15, 2022.**

**Apply Now**  
[www.neafcs.org](http://www.neafcs.org)

**Job opportunity**

[www.neafcs.org/job-opportunities](http://www.neafcs.org/job-opportunities)

## References

- Bates, J. S., Benson, J. J., & Yelland, E. L. (2020). Forming a multistate network: From passion and coincidence to vision and sustainability. *Journal of Extension*, 58(1).
- Garden-Robinson, J., Nwadike, L., Ingham, B., Haraminac, E., Nichols, J., Mills-Gray, S., Rozhon, A. & Coleman, S. M. (2019). Measuring the regional impact of Extension home food preservation education using standardized evaluation tools. *The Journal of the National Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences*, 14, 45-59.
- Harden, N., Bain, J., Heim, S., Bohen, L., & Becher, E. (2020). The art and science of networking Extension. *Journal of Extension*, 58(2).
- National Center for Home Food Preservation. (n.d.). *Evolution of USDA home canning recommendations*. Retrieved April 6, 2021, from [https://nchfp.uga.edu/educators/historical/usda\\_pubs\\_evolution.html](https://nchfp.uga.edu/educators/historical/usda_pubs_evolution.html)
- Sempier, S. H., Swann, D. L., Graham, L., Hale, C., Maung-Douglass, E. S., Wilson, M., Bethel, M., Plotkin, P. T., & Main, M. B. (2018). Multiple-university Extension program addresses postdisaster oil spill needs through private funding partnership. *Journal of Extension*, 56(4).
- Thomas, J., Stripling, C. T., Stephens, C. A., & Stephenson, L. (2018). Engagement in Extension professional associations: Tennessee Extension professionals' attitudes and perceptions. *Journal of Extension*, 56(2).
- Ulin, P. R., Robinson, E. T., & Tolley, E. E. (2005). *Qualitative methods in public health: A field guide for applied research*. Jossey-Bass, which is an imprint of Wiley.
- Young, A. J. (2018). Developing regional and multi-state extension collaborations. *Journal of Animal Science*, 94(E-Supplement 5), 281-282.

**Table 1***Results from Interview Questions: 'Where We've Been'*

Question Categories	Sub-categories	Response Themes
Professional Development	Motivation	Helping others Personal fulfillment Overcoming ignorance
	Impact	Working together Personal development Results achieved
	Mentoring	Mutual mentorship Mentor/Mentee relationship Need for mentorship
Program Development	Audiences	General, larger demographic Specific, small demographic Not- or under-served groups
	Problems	General food safety Specific food safety/COVID Overcoming ignorance
	Solutions	General applications Specific applications/COVID Evaluation tool use
Program Impact	Assessment	Evaluation tool Personal appreciation Variety of successes listed
	State Impact	General teamwork Specific programs/COVID Evaluation tool used Overcoming ignorance
	Food Safety Education	Benefits of teamwork Specific programming Results needed Overcoming ignorance

**Table 2***Results from Interview Questions: 'Where We're Going'*

Question Categories	Sub-categories	Response Themes
Food Safety Topics	Biggest Issue	Variety of topics COVID related topics Overcoming ignorance
	New Topics/Role	Variety of topics COVID related topics Overcoming ignorance Team member's role
Communication	Decision-Making	General – why team works Specific actions employed
	Improving Communication	General – what works Specific – needs work No improvements needed
Change	Longevity	How and why team works Changing membership Cautions and needs
	Goals/Planning	General ideas about change Specific action items Implications in lieu of COVID Yes to strategic planning No to strategic planning
~~~~~		
Extras	Final Comments	General – team functioning Specific – team activities Comments related to COVID
	Points of Interest (POIs)	Organizational obstacles Trend – tapping of Extension by other organizations