

Creating our Future

North Carolina Cooperative Extension Employee Listening Session Annual Conference – November 6, 2013

Approximately 600 employees attended the Employee Listening Session at the annual conference to provide input into the visioning initiative, *Creating our Future*. Working in small groups at their tables, they discussed the questions posed to them and input their responses into UserVoice, an electronic survey tool. The full detailed responses to the questions have been categorized and are attached in an excel spreadsheet. The high level themes from the responses are summarized in this document.



THE BIG PICTURE

Q1 - What are the big questions we need to be answering in order to thrive -- In order to move forward with the new reality?

The general question categories posed by participants generally fall into one of following nine categories:

1. How to secure reliable funding?
2. How to continue to meet county/community needs? ***
3. How to remain relevant in changing landscape?
4. How to recruit, retain, and organize effective, essential staff? ***
5. What should relationship with universities look like?
6. How to prioritize programs? ***
7. How to raise visibility of NCCE and demonstrate value of its work?
8. How best to organize staff and programs geographically?
9. Big Questions of Mission, Objectives, Clients, and Vision for Future

The number of responses in each category provides a rough vote count for the questions on respondents' minds. The top three categories in terms of number of responses are starred in the list.



DECISION FILTERS

Q2 - Which decision filters are most important?

The decision criteria are ranked from high to low below.

Criterion	Vote Count
Cooperative Extension uniquely positioned to deliver program	186
Impactful program outcomes	178
External demand for a program	152
Sufficient research base/specialist support for a program	72
Positive program revenue/expense ratio	31
Quality and availability of program inputs	19
Size, scope, and productivity of a program	15
The history and community expectations of a program	12

Q2a – Give one example of a program in your area that meets ONE criterion and describe how it meets it.

The companion excel spreadsheet shows all responses under subheadings that correspond to the major program areas listed on the NCCE website.¹ This method shows a rough vote count for which program areas people think are successful (although top votes are likely correlated with the program area the respondent works in).

Agricultural programs are cited most often, with 4-H and Youth Development second, followed by Home and Family, Health and Nutrition, and a few responses for other program areas. Specific themes/programs that were cited most often included: Farm to Fork and local food systems initiatives, agriculture research that is unbiased, economic development, financial literacy, canning and food preservation, animal waste education credits, and pesticide training certifications. We note program areas that were not mentioned include Soil, Water, and Air, and Forestry Resources.

¹ Many responses listed multiple programs; these have been duplicated and appear in the corresponding program categories.

Some additional themes emerged from the responses:

- 4-H and youth programs engage youth without access to alternative activities and have important impacts by teaching important life skills.
- The Master Gardener program is in high demand, as evidenced by class registrations filling up quickly.
- Agriculture programs provide unbiased and technical information that is research-based and would be unavailable or unaffordable for farmers if it weren't for NCCE.
- Health and nutrition programs make meaningful impact by directly helping individuals live healthier lifestyles, reducing rates of obesity.
- Home and family programs make meaningful impact by helping families manage their budgets and gain access to safety net program benefits.

Q2b – Give one example of a program in your area that does not meet criteria and describe how/in what way it does not meet the criteria.

The same sorting strategy noted above in Q2a was used to organize these responses and grouped by NCCE program area. Programs cited are spread across the different program areas and many of the same programs that were used in 2a as examples that meet a criterion are cited here as programs that do not meet the criterion. However, one explanation that appears frequently for this question and transcends program areas is that *a similar program is offered by another organization or supplied by the private market* and therefore NCCE's duplicate program is unnecessary. More specific trends include:

- Health and nutrition programs should be offered -- or already are offered -- by the Department of Health.
- Having staff attend county fairs and other community festivals is not a good use of their time.
- Programs for the elderly and aging should be managed by senior centers and the Division of Aging and Adult Services in HHS.
- Water and soil samples are the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture.
- Forest related programs should be managed by the NC Forestry Service.

While identifying potential programs to pare is difficult, the responses suggest that a good strategy might be to look for programs and services that are similar to those offered by other agencies. The miscellaneous responses at the bottom of the excel worksheet support the idea that NCCE may need to focus its program offerings as there is a sense that the organization is trying to be all thing to all people with responses ranging from "pigeon control" to "transfer of non-titled belongings (grandma's yellow pie plate)."



OUR ORGANIZATION

Q3 -- What will work to make our whole organization and staffing most effective?

The detailed responses for Q3 in the companion excel spreadsheet have been organized into groups with similar themes, although the responses varied to a greater degree than when participants were asked to cite specific programs. Some themes and trends in the responses are:

- The clear tension is between those who favor a move to a more regional organization and those who prefer organization of staff and programs by county. Most responses indicate openness to having some programs or agents serve larger regions, but many are reluctant to move away from having at least some staff dedicated to a sole county because they fear it would result in a loss of support for NCCE at the county level.
- Many responses cite specialization of staff as a way to consolidate. However, the definition of “specialization” varies across responses. In some instances it refers to staff that specialize in one field or program and could serve multiple counties, but in other responses it means having one staff member trained in multiple fields in order to specialize in serving one county.
- A number of responses suggest that more collaboration both within NCCE and with other partners could be a way to streamline resources, however, the explanations provided are not very specific about how that would work.
- A number of responses stress the importance of soliciting feedback from the communities served about how NCCE should be organized and which programs should be offered to suit their needs. This idea is echoed in responses across all of the questions and seems to stem from a concern that a more centralized organizational model will decrease the impact of NCCE at the county/ community level and erode support for the organization.



HEADLINES

Q4 -- It is 2033 and you are writing an article about the unique and special value that Extension provides to North Carolina.

The headlines prepared by participants are very diverse. We note the following themes:

- NCCE is behind the success of agriculture in North Carolina and agriculture is driving economic development.
- NCCE programs have solved important problems like food insecurity, obesity, and global food shortages.
- People recognize the work that NCCE does and value its impact on the state and their communities.
- NCCE expands its reach from community to state, country, and even global level.
- NCCE program participants are entering leadership positions as elected officials and Congress and White House are filled with 4-H grads!