Success Outcome Markers in Extension (Some):
An Evaluation Tool for Complex, Hard-to-Measure Transformational Programming

S. Kay Rockwell and LaDeane R. Jha, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Agricultural Extension Educators seeking better ways to evaluate complex, multi-strategy programs that assist individuals transform their lives conducted action research to test the application of Outcomes Engineering concepts originally developed for evaluation work in social service agencies. Six concepts considered in the testing process were vision, mission, “whos”, outcome challenges, success markers, and journey mapping. Causal relationship between a program and an outcome were considered and useful theoretical constructs were developed. SOME (Success Outcome Markers in Extension) is the practical application of the findings.

Major points of information to be shared in the carousel roundtable session. A paper describing the tools embedded in the SOME process: vision, mission, “whos,” outcome challenges, Success Markers and Journey Mapping will be discussed as they apply to Agricultural Extension Educators as they focus on the strengths of their programs and clients, identify and involve stakeholders, and integrate evaluation strategies into their programming.

Theoretical/philosophical themes. It is no longer sufficient in Extension to report the number of programs offered, participants reached and goals attained. Rather, Agricultural Extension Educators must be poised to report results that focus on social, economic and environmental outcomes. For complex, hard-to-measure transformational programs, realistic evaluation processes need to be developed and SOME (Success Outcome Markers in Extension) addresses this challenge. A team of Extension Specialists, Educators, Project Assistants and Coordinators, community partners, and graduate students used an appreciative inquiry approach to (a) identify and build on strengths in the group, (b) experience generative conversations to move the group into creative action, (c) create visions of what could be, and (d) use the power of dialogue to transform the organization.

Results and/or conclusions. SOME, or parts of the process, is/was (a) included in the evaluation plan for five complex, transformational Extension programs to assess outcomes and (b) presented in hands-on-training workshops for Agricultural Extension Educators that initiated systemic change to start integrating Success Markers into the state-wide Cooperative Extension programming process. This strategy is strengthening the integration of program evaluation in the entire program planning process. During the two-year period the team worked on SOME, the strategy provided outcome documentation team members used for supporting evidence to help them continue or obtain 2.3 M in grants or contracts in transformational programming projects.

Educational importance. SOME is a useful programming strategy to identify realistic programs outcomes and impacts in transformational programming. Colleagues in Agricultural Extension Education, as well as colleagues in sister agencies and organizations, can use the constructs to strengthen the integration of evaluation into the programming process, document outcomes and impacts, and use the findings to obtain resources for additional programming.