An International Outreach Strategy to Counteract Budget Cuts: Sharing Curriculum for Formal and Nonformal Education

Arlen Etling, lead author
Associate Director,
Office of International Affairs
University of Nebraska–Lincoln
110 Agriculture Hall
Lincoln, NE 68583-0706
402-472-7018
FAX 402-472-7911
aetling1@unl.edu

Susan Fritz, co-author
Daniel Wheeler, co-author

Budget cuts are weakening outreach programs of universities and organizations. These cuts affect local communities (rural and urban neighborhoods, communities of interest such as agricultural producers, and communities of scholars–faculty and students–at universities). US organizations and universities are struggling to address needs of communities in the US and they are cutting international programs that assist communities in other countries. Likewise, budgets are limited for outreach programs of organizations and universities in other countries.

At the same time, information to strengthen local communities is being requested around this state and from international partners, especially in Mexico and Afghanistan. Distance education appears to be the best strategy to deliver needed information to strengthen local communities.

The purpose of this model-building study is to create and evaluate a proof-of-concept interactive website focused on practical tools for leaders in 1) community development, 2) family strengths, 3) youth development, and 4) highland agriculture. With internet-ready partners in Mexico and Afghanistan, we will collaboratively 1) determine curriculum focus and content, 2) format user-friendly training materials for web delivery, 3) evaluate impacts of the web-based curriculum in each country, and 4) evaluate the teamwork among the partners.

The methods include partnership formation (using a newly developed instrument), group conferencing for consensus decision making, curriculum development, distance delivery through an interactive website, comparing training models (college courses, extension workshops, self-learning, and tutorials) in three countries, and evaluation.

The procedure for the study includes four stages: 1) face-to-face meetings with all partners to formalize partnerships and make policy decisions; 2) a period of work on the website, its installation, and testing for accessibility of materials and for its ability to facilitate interaction among partners; 3) implementation of training activities using resources from the website; and 4) evaluation of results and impacts.
Conclusions. Anticipated outcomes include the website, accessible to anyone, and model training applications using our web-based resources. We anticipate that the content and methods will be transferable and expandable to meet needs in other countries. A new Partnership Exploration Instrument will help create effective partnerships for this project that will strengthen international outreach programs of the US partners including minority land grant universities. The project will strengthen USDA’s ability to assist universities around the world to collectively address development issues and to extend knowledge to remote sites. It will strengthen the global competencies of students, faculty, and clients of the partner universities.

Questions for discussion. Is this strategy sound? What are the barriers to international collaboration via a website? How can the website best support outreach in remote sites?

Educational importance. Expanding the capability of an interactive website to exchange curriculum materials with remote communities will save scarce university funds. It will allow access to remote rural areas in countries like Mexico enabling extension programs to be offered for the first time. In countries like Afghanistan, curriculum can be delivered to locations where textbooks are unavailable and outside consultants cannot go due to security problems. Finally, this project will build and test partnerships for collaborative educational outreach to strengthen local communities, families, youth and agriculture.

Handouts of the Partnership Exploration Instrument, the face-to-face conference schedule, the website home pages, the evaluation strategy, and evaluation instruments will be available.