

Writing "SMART" Objectives¹

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Brief Overview of Objectives

An objective is a statement that specifies the measurable changes we expect in our target audiences as a result of our Extension education programs. In this respect, an objective should be learner-centered in that it should describe the progress that will occur in the *learner* after successfully completing an Extension learning experience, activity, or program series.

In Extension, measurable objectives are a top priority. A goal is a broad statement that reflects the overall purpose of the program and what the program will accomplish. A goal is defined at a conceptual level and is not measurable. Measurable objectives are sets of specific statements describing the short-term, intermediate, and long-term intended results of a program that fulfill the overall goals of extension. These results need to be attainable and inherently capable of being evaluated. In other words, the objective must be written in a way that determines whether the objective has been achieved using evaluation data. Measurable objectives have several benefits in that they help us to:

- provide direction to our Extension programs and efforts;
- determine appropriate types of learning experiences to offer;
- communicate the intended results of our program to stakeholders; and
- develop our evaluation plan.

SMART Objectives

One way to insure that our objectives are measurable is to make them SMART:

S - Specific

M- Measurable

M -Meaningful

A –Assigned

R - Realistic

T - Timed

1. This document is FCS6016, one of a series of the Family Youth and Community Sciences Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Original publication date May 23, 2006. Revised July 11, 2006. Visit the EDIS Web Site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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Specific

Objectives are focused on specific changes that we expect in our target audience. Generally, we state the specific change based on whether we are writing short-term (annual) objectives or long-term (major) objectives.

Typically, short-term objectives focus on the type of:

- knowledge gain,
- attitude change,
- skills developed,
- aspiration change, and/or
- behavior change or practice adoption.

Generally, long-term objectives involve changes in:

- social conditions,
- economic conditions and gains, and/or
- environmental changes.

After determining what type of change you want in your participants, clearly and specifically describe what the change is. For example, "Participants will increase their savings by at least 50 dollars a month." Use active words that describe how and through what activities the participant will make these changes. Let's build on our first example:

"After completing the 6 sessions of our financial management program, participants will increase their savings by at least 50 dollars a month over a twelve month period." Active words clearly focus on the changes in your participants. The more specific you can be with your objectives, the easier it will be to measure and evaluate them."

Measurable

SMART objectives must specifically indicate the degree or quantity of the change expected using descriptive words or numbers. For example, how

many skills will be developed, what percentage of knowledge gain do you expect, etc. These methods of measurement build in the indicators you will need to track the success of your program. A measurable objective also indicates how the change will be determined. For example, the objective must specify how you will determine the change in knowledge, attitude, skills, aspirations, or behavior. If the objective is not measurable, you and your participants will have no idea if the program is actually working!

Making objectives measurable makes them visible and holds all stakeholders accountable for success. Of course, the degree of change is situational based on many factors such as what participants already know about the topic, participants level of motivation to change, etc.

Meaningful

People will not be motivated to change if the change is not worthwhile. When creating a program and writing objectives, ask yourself "Is this filling an important need in the community?" "Are the objectives going to be valued by the participants?" Everyone's time is valuable and creating meaningful objectives will communicate that your program is important and valuable. Keeping objectives learner-centered will help you determine what your community members need to learn.

Assigned

In order to make your program as successful as possible, you need to make your target audience as specific as possible. This means for each program your objectives are assigned to a specific group of people, enabling you to really hone in on the clientele who will truly benefit from your services. Having an assigned target audience for your objectives makes your educational program client-centered and allows you to tailor materials to their needs.

Realistic

The more realistic your objectives are, and the more the end product seems within reach, the more you and your staff and volunteers will want to make it happen. If objectives are not realistic, you can build your staff and/or your volunteers up with false hopes

that can leave them discouraged when they cannot meet these high expectations. However, if you are honest and realistic about what you can reasonably expect from your program, it will benefit everyone involved. If you share these objectives with participants it is even more critical to make them realistic. This is because when participants successfully complete objectives, it can build their self-esteem and confidence in not only applying their new skills and knowledge, but also in achieving future goals and objectives in Extension programs. By setting realistic objectives, you can build success and confidence into your program.

Timed

A timed objective puts limits on how long you and your participants have to complete the objective. It isn't so much a deadline as it is a target date or point in the Extension program process where you expect to see certain changes. This makes your objectives more specific because you are letting your participants know approximately when they can see improvements. Timeliness also makes your objectives more realistic because participants will know that some knowledge, skills, and behaviors may take time, and some can be picked up quickly. Additionally, your objective will be more measurable with a timed component.

Template for a SMART Objective

By using the template below, the educator can be certain to include all of the elements of SMART objectives. The educator would simply enter his/her specific information in the parentheses.

The objective would be written as follows:

To (increase/decrease/change) (what specifically) **by** (how much) **among** (who) **by** (when or time frame) **as determined by** (how will you measure it).

By using this framework, you can create SMART objectives for your program and start to see significant improvements in the way you communicate the intended benefits of your extension work. The sentence structure can vary as long as all of the components are contained in the objective.

Sample SMART Objectives by Program Area

Family and Consumer Sciences

At least 50 percent of the 40 participants in the Noonlighting Program will reach or exceed their professionally described weight loss goal within one year of joining the program as indicated by pre/post weigh-in.

4-H/Youth Development

80 percent of the youth who will participate in the weeklong Shooting Sports Program will increase their knowledge of safe and responsible use of firearms as indicated by increasing their test scores from pre to post by at least 30 percent.

Horticulture

At least 30 landscape maintenance professionals will attend the Limited Certification Training workshops. By the end of workshops, 80 percent will have increased their knowledge of pesticide use and safety, IPM and ELM/FYN as measured by a retrospective pre-test. Ten percent will take and pass the Limited Pesticide License Exam.

Natural Resources

At least 300 waterfront property owners participating in the Water Quality Program will adopt at least one management practice to protect water quality as measured by a three-month follow-up survey.

Agriculture

The average annual nitrate concentration will decrease by 30% due to changes in farming practices among 50 farmers in Sunshine county who participated in the Farm Smart Program as measured by yearly soil analysis over the next four years.

Sea Grant

In a four-week follow-up survey, at least 50 percent of the 60 participants in the boating safety program will indicate they adopted at least two new safety practices they were not using prior to the program.

Conclusion

Setting SMART objectives will allow Extension educators to accomplish a number of tasks. It allows for efficient evaluation of programs by determining target audience, realistic expected outcomes, timeframe, measurement criteria, etc. These objectives serve as a foundation for determining program success and effectiveness. Creating SMART objectives is a vital step in program planning for Extension professionals.

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