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Impacting Community Well-Being Through Effective Engagement Using the SEED Method

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Cover Page Footnote

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Impacting Community Well-Being Through Effective Engagement Using the SEED Method

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Abstract. Cooperative Extension can make a significant impact on health in the United States through effective community engagement that focuses on the complex socio-ecological factors that impact health. The Stakeholder Engagement in Question Development Method (SEED Method) employs community based participatory research principles to engage communities in research, problem-solving, and action planning. Projects employing the SEED Method engage community members from diverse backgrounds, create community capacity, result in tangible outcomes, and foment inter-organizational trust and networking. A SEED Toolkit is available on the Extension Foundation Campus site and provides implementation instructions, tools and timelines, and potential applications within Extension.

INTRODUCTION

Cooperative Extension has envisioned a role for itself in promoting the health of the U.S. population at every stage of life (Braun et al., 2014; Braun & Rogers, 2018). The Extension National Framework for Health creates the foundation for that work and emphasizes the interplay of individual, community, and societal factors on health and the importance of addressing social determinants of health to eliminate health inequities (Braun et al., 2014; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Burton et al., 2021; Sallis et al., 2015). To make this vision a reality, Extension professionals must expand their direct education activities to include effective community engagement (Linnell et al., 2020).

Extension has a history of collaborating with community partners and coalitions (Buys & Rennekamp, 2020; Linnell et al., 2020). Community-engaged health work grounded in participatory principles is relatively new to Extension, however, and evidence-based community engagement methods are needed (Windsor, 2013). The principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR) are well established (Israel et al., 2012; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010) and include key principles of inclusive engagement, trust, power-sharing, and joint scholarship to foster sustained and mutually beneficial collaborations (Collins et al., 2018; Lucero et al., 2020). Having said that, Extension's application of CBPR methods in health promotion and disease prevention is evolving (Strayer et al., 2020).

To facilitate this evolution, evidence-based engagement tools should be available to Extension professionals to increase their capacity to lead inclusive health collaborations that mobilize communities for action (Braun et al., 2014; Linnell et al., 2020). The Stakeholder Engagement in Question Development (SEED) Method is such a tool. It is based on CBPR principles and has been applied in multiple contexts to address health and community issues (Rafie et al., 2019; Zimmerman et al., 2017; Zimmerman, Cook, et al., 2020).

IMPLEMENTATION AND OUTCOMES OF THE SEED METHOD

The SEED Method is a multi-stakeholder approach to engaging communities in research, problem-solving, and action planning. Developed at Virginia Commonwealth University (Zimmerman et al., 2017), the SEED Method provides a framework for collaborative research and action planning that can be scaled up or down, depending on project resources and goals. A community research team (CRT) directs the activities of the project and engages additional stakeholders to form topic groups (TGs) who work together to learn about the community need, explore the factors influencing it, and develop priority actions to address it. Additional stakeholders are consulted to gather local perspectives that inform the TGs. In this way, the process gives voice to a broad spectrum of individuals, including those often left out of decision-making. Evaluations of projects using the SEED Method have found that this process engages community members from diverse backgrounds, creates community capacity in research and action planning, results in tangible outcomes, and foments interorganizational trust and networking (Rafie et al., 2019; Zimmerman, Rafie, et al., 2020).

The steps in the SEED Method are as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Steps of the SEED Method.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY AND ENGAGE

A CRT directs the activities of the SEED Method. The CRT's composition should include people with a range of experience with the issue of focus and with a personal interest in and time to dedicate to the project. Governance of the research team should be structured based on CBPR principles, where the perspectives of all members are valued, and power and decision-making are shared.

The CRT gathers information on the community issue and identifies groups of community members to participate in TGs. A stakeholder selection matrix is used for this purpose and ensures that the CRT gives equitable voice to diverse groups affected by the issue. The TGs meet seven times to complete Steps 2–5 of the SEED Method.

STEP 2: CONSULT

The first three TG meetings are dedicated to information gathering and co-learning. Members share their own knowledge and experiences, receive information from the CRT, and gather local information through key informant interviews and focus groups conducted by the CRT. In this way, a broader range of community members inform the strategies developed to address the issue.

STEP 3: CONCEPTUALIZE

Conceptual models are developed by each TG to organize and synthesize their collective knowledge into a visual representation of the factors affecting the issue, illustrating their relationships and connections. The CRT leads the TGs through a facilitated three-step process that first has TG members brainstorm factors that affect the issue. The TGs then position the factors on a wall, whiteboard, or electronic document according to their relationship with the issue and each other. Finally, connecting arrows are drawn between the factors, representing potential causal pathways. The resulting model is used as a tool to help TGs develop strategies to address the issue (see Figure 2).

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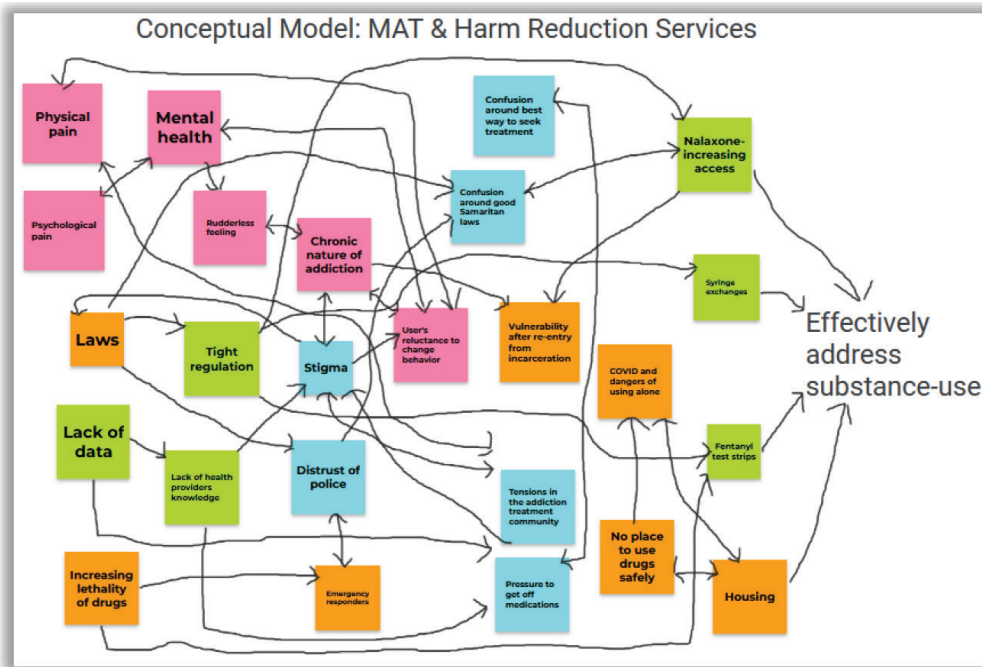


Figure 2. Topic group conceptual model (electronic and on wall).

STEP 4: GENERATE STRATEGIES

The TGs use their lived experience and insights gained through the previous activities to develop a list of possible strategies. The CRT facilitates the process, using a series of prompts to solicit ideas from each member and round-robin discussion of each proposed strategy. The final list of each TG's strategies is collated and prepared for prioritization.

STEP 5: PRIORITIZE STRATEGIES

The final activity of the TGs is to prioritize their strategies. The number of strategies prioritized for each TG is predetermined by the CRT. After discussing each strategy and making changes, as needed, each TG conducts multiple rounds of voting to select the designated number of strategies. Each round of voting reduces the number of possible strategies until the predetermined number is achieved.

STEP 6: DISSEMINATE STRATEGIES AND ACTION PLANNING

The final step of the SEED Method is to disseminate the prioritized strategies to the community and mobilize them for action. A community forum is conducted with key organizations and individuals to share the results of the process and describe the prioritized strategies. During the forum, participants are asked for their input and then have the opportunity to select specific strategies to implement through diverse stakeholder workgroups. The CRT facilitates the formation of the workgroups for selected strategies and supports the development of action plans by each workgroup in subsequent meetings.

APPLICATION OF SEED IN EXTENSION

Extension has a crucial role to play in addressing community health issues and a long history of community collaboration (Buys & Rennekamp, 2020; Murriel et al., 2020). The SEED Method has been applied to various community health issues, including opioid misuse, lung cancer disparity, and diabetes, resulting in tangible, community-level outcomes. Resources to learn how to use the SEED Method, instructional videos, and all the SEED Method tools are available on our Extension Foundation Campus Course site (<https://campus.extension.org/course/view.php?id=2146>).

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