

Abstract

The "In Search Of" (ISO) program was developed to address complex professional development needs of 4-H county Extension faculty in Florida. This innovative initiative targeted six critical areas: conducting needs assessments, engaging stakeholders, aligning local programs with state and national priorities, and developing evaluation, communication, and scholarship plans. Leveraging models such as human performance technology, cognitive apprenticeship, self-determination theory, and change communication theory, the program emphasized guided learning, motivation, and strategic communication.

Funded by the Florida 4-H Foundation, ISO operated in a hybrid format over 12 months, combining virtual seminars with practical, facilitated applications. Participants developed actionable deliverables, including needs assessments, reporting templates, and program plans. Evaluation showed that participants improved their skills and confidence, with many incorporating findings into their plans of work and achieving personal career milestones. Despite its small sample size, the program demonstrated significant success, providing a foundation for expansion to other Extension disciplines.

Narrative for NAE4-HYDP Excellence in Peer Support Award 2025

“In Search of: A Vibrant 4-H Program and Balanced Life”

Goal of the Program: The primary goal of the "In Search Of" (ISO) program was to provide targeted, innovative professional development to 4-H county Extension faculty in Florida. The program aimed to address complex professional challenges such as conducting needs assessments, engaging stakeholders, aligning local programs with state and national Extension priorities, and developing evaluation, communication, and scholarship plans. These objectives were designed to enhance agents' capacity for programmatic and personal success while aligning their work with institutional guidelines for permanent status and promotion.

Intended Outcomes: The program was designed to achieve several key outcomes:

1. Equip Extension agents with the knowledge and skills needed to conduct effective needs assessments and stakeholder engagement processes.
2. Enable agents to align their local program priorities with broader Extension goals and reporting requirements.
3. Provide agents with tools to create tailored evaluation, communication, and scholarship plans to support program sustainability and impact.
4. Foster agents' confidence and competence in addressing complex professional tasks through a combination of guided learning and practical application.

Program Funding: The ISO program was funded internally by the Florida 4-H Foundation in the amount of \$5,000. The program also utilized existing UF/IFAS Extension platforms and infrastructure, such as virtual seminar tools and an intranet for housing educational materials, to minimize costs and maximize accessibility. The hybrid approach also saved travel costs. Foundation funds were used to purchase workbooks and marketing materials to implement county communication plans, which was one of the deliverables of this professional development program.

Program Development: In 2023, our team conducted a needs assessment to determine Florida 4-H agent's top needs for professional development. Themes included how to conduct a needs assessment that engages stakeholders, aligning local programs to state and national Extension priorities, evaluation, reporting, communication, and scholarship. These needs are not new; they are well documented in the literature.

Needs assessment is crucial to ensure Extension programs are relevant but requires skill in both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies (Seevers et al., 1997). Interpreting data to inform decision-making is also critical (Lakai et al., 2012). As part of this process, stakeholder engagement ensures Extension programs are supported by the community; therefore agents must possess facilitation and consensus-building skills to support program goals with community priorities (Arnold & Place, 2010). Agents must also be able to evaluate programs to achieve desired outcomes (Arnold et al., 2020) and share results to communicate value to stakeholders, funders, and the public (Franz et al., 2014). Reporting the results is not enough; agents must be proficient in tailoring their messages to different audiences and using multiple platforms to reach a broad clientele (Telg & Irani, 2012).

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In addition to all the above responsibilities, agents are also expected to contribute to the field in scholarly ways. At our institution, Extension agents go through the same rigorous permanent status and promotion system as academic faculty. Scholarship also helps bridge the gap between research and practice, ensuring that Extension work is grounded in scientific evidence and contributes to the broader academic community (Franz, 2009).

Rather than relying on traditional didactic educational strategies and frameworks, our team intentionally selected models and theories that we believed to be more conducive to addressing the complex professional development needs of today’s Extension professional. Drawing from this data, the team designed the ISO program using innovative educational strategies grounded in the human performance technology (HPT) model (Stolovitch & Keeps, 1999), cognitive apprenticeship model (Collins et al., 1989), self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and change communication theory (Lewis, 2011). These models emphasized guided learning, authentic context, intrinsic motivation, and strategic communication to address the nuanced nature of the identified challenges.

The program was delivered in a hybrid format over 12 months, with monthly seminars held virtually at centralized locations within each geographic district. Post-seminar sessions were facilitated by RSAs to guide agents in applying newly learned skills. Educational materials were made available on an intranet platform, and agents developed several artifacts, including a stakeholder one-pager, updated program reporting templates, evaluation and communication plans, and a scholarship plan. These artifacts served as practical applications of the program's content.

Program Evaluation: The ISO program was evaluated using a combination of document analysis, informal interviews, and formative feedback from participants. Key findings included:

- **Learning and Application:** Ten participants completed a needs assessment and communication plan, while six developed evaluation plans, and five incorporated needs assessment findings into their annual plans of work or promotion packets. This demonstrated progress in aligning program activities with professional development goals.
- **Participant Feedback:** Participants reported high levels of satisfaction with the program. They highlighted needs assessment, reporting, and evaluation as the most valuable components. Statements from participants included:
 - "This program encouraged wonderful and hard conversations in my county as we examine our program needs and make strides to move it forward. I did a complete re-write [of my plan of work] as a result of the ISO sessions. ISO pushed me to examine my current program, efforts, evaluation, and impacts. In doing so, it encouraged me to make changes to create a stronger, more focused program with the potential for lasting impact. This has made such a difference to me, my county 4-H program, and my professional journey!
 - "I have been an agent for 10 years, and this is the first time I have understood what I should be evaluating and how to do it."
 - "Being coached through how to do a needs assessment, what data to collect, and how to analyze it was huge for me."

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- **Limitations and Improvements:** The main limitation was the small sample size, with only 11 participants representing a specific segment of Florida’s 4-H agents. Feedback from the first cohort informed plans to include more in-person interaction and additional time between topics in future iterations.

Conclusion: The ISO program has proven to be an innovative and effective approach to addressing complex professional development needs among 4-H Extension agents. By combining advanced educational strategies with practical application, the program has empowered agents to enhance their programs, align with institutional priorities, and achieve personal career goals. The success of the pilot cohort provides a strong foundation for expanding the program to other Extension areas, ensuring broader impact and sustainability.

References:

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Purpose & Objectives

The purpose of this training series is to provide comprehensive support for county 4-H faculty to develop, execute, and evaluate a balanced 4-H program (and personal life). This training program is available for new or seasoned faculty. It is designed as a year-long commitment to guide and support a small cohort of county faculty through five complex processes essential to career and personal success:

1. Engaging your advisory committee in a county-wide needs assessment to identify priorities for your program (or developing a strong advisory committee if you don't currently have one).
2. Linking program priorities (based on a needs assessment) to major programs in the annual report of accomplishment and permanent status/promotion packet. This includes selecting appropriate objectives, educational activities, and evaluation tools to support programs.
3. Designing an evaluation plan that connects medium- and long-term program outcomes to overall impacts. This includes one-on-one support for collecting, analyzing, and reporting results for different stakeholder groups.
4. Developing a comprehensive communication plan to build brand identity and public value for your county program.
5. Creating a scholarship plan that supports program priorities while balancing personal career and life goals.

Expected Outcomes

- County stakeholders feel ownership in the program because they were engaged in a meaningful way
- Program priorities align with major extension programs, objectives, and educational methods.
- Evaluation methods support objectives and outcomes for positive youth development and volunteer development, which supports scholarship efforts.
- The county 4-H program is recognized as a premier positive youth development program because of clear, consistent communication about opportunities to get involved, and the impact 4-H is having in their communities.
- County faculty have a system in place to manage program expectations with personal life and career goals.

Delivery Format

This series will be delivered over the course of one year (12 months) with a small cohort of county faculty. The 4-H RSA team will provide individualized coaching and support between group sessions. Group sessions include virtual, hybrid, and in-person sessions. For hybrid sessions, participants will meet with their 4-H RSA at a designated location within their administrative districts. In-person sessions will be paired with other in-person professional development opportunities such as the Youth Development Institute (YDI) and Extension Professionals Association of Florida (EPAF).

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Communication

Session recordings, job aids, collaboration tools, and other supporting documents will be accessed through Microsoft TEAMS. The 4-H RSA Team will provide quarterly progress reports for each county to share with their County Director, District Director, and county stakeholders.

Timeline

Sept 1 County inventories are due in Qualtrics

Session 1 September 21, 2023; 10AM-12PM EST/9AM-11AM CST

This first session will be hybrid. There will be a virtual session that will cover how to engage your advisory committee in collecting data for a countywide needs assessment. After the presentation, participants will work with their 4-H RSA to plan and execute their needs assessment. By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Describe the roles and responsibilities of 4-H County Associations, Advisory Committees, Expansion and Review Committees, and County Foundations.
- Identify individuals to serve on their needs assessment guiding coalition.
- Develop an action plan for strengthening Advisory/Expansion and Review Committees
- Select a date, location/format for a county listening session

During the month of October, counties will work one-on-one with 4-H RSAs to conduct listening sessions and collect data for the needs assessment.

Session 2 November 14, 2023; 10AM-3PM EST/9AM-2PM CST

The section session will focus on how to analyze needs assessment data. By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Analyze quantitative data to describe county participation and needs
- Analyze qualitative data collected during the listening session
- Triangulate both types of data to provide a rich description of program priorities

Before session three, counties will meet with their guiding coalition to prioritize program needs based on the data collected.

Session 3 January 30-February 1 (YDI)

Session three will be in-person (in conjunction with YDI). This session will focus on selecting program objectives, evaluation tools, and educational methods to support program priorities identified during the needs assessment. By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Align county program priorities with their overall situation statement, educational methods, objectives, evaluation methods, and outcomes with positive youth development and volunteer development outcomes.
- Develop an evaluation plan to support county program outcomes and impacts

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Session 4 February 13, 2024; 10AM-3PM EST/9AM-2PM CST

The fourth session will be hybrid and will focus on solid communication practices. After a virtual education presentation, participants will work with their 4-H RSAs on developing a year-round communication plan to build the 4-H brand and public value for the program. This plan will include at least one promotional event (such as an open house, National 4-H week celebration, or National Volunteer Appreciation). At 1PM eastern/12PM central, a guest speaker will present strategies specifically for making the most of social media. This session will be open to anyone in extension who wishes to participate, but participants registered for this training series will receive funds to enhance the marketing strategies identified in their communication plan. By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Identify at least three marketing strategies to build brand identity in their county
- Develop a year-round communication plan specific to each county stakeholder group
- Plan a promotional event to market the local 4-H program

During the month of March 2024, participants will start implementing their communication plans. The 4-H RSAs will offer “virtual office hours” on March 12, 2024, from 10AM-12PM EST/9AM-11AM CST to assist with any questions or trouble shooting

Session 5 April 16, 2024; 10AM-12PM EST/9AM-11AM CST

The fifth and final hybrid session will focus on developing a comprehensive scholarship plan. After this session, participants will be able to:

Identify a virtual presentation, participants will work with their 4-H RSA to customize their plan for scholarship that also balances their career and personal goals. By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Identify a system to prioritize tasks and organize work
- Develop a scholarship plan to support permanent status and promotion efforts
- Use the “positive no” to stay focused on personal and career goals

During the summer months (May, June, and July 2024), participants will implement their evaluation, communication, and scholarship plans. 4-H RSAs will be available for individual consultations for questions and troubleshooting upon request.

Session 6 August 2024

The final session will be in-person in conjunction with EPAF. This session will focus on celebrating the completion of this process. This could include (but not limited to) a celebratory dinner, a poster or abstract presentation, and awards. Participants completing this first cohort cycle will be invited to serve as mentors for the next co-hort.



County 4-H Associations

The purpose of this document is to clarify the roles and functions of your County 4-H Association. There are three functions that help support equity, diversity, inclusion, and equal opportunity:

- **Financial-** fiscal accountability of 4-H club funds and fundraising for the total county 4-H program.
- **Advisory Committee-** needs assessment and stakeholder engagement to support the overall program.
- **Expansion and Review Committee-** oversees equal opportunity and outreach to underserved audiences to ensure opportunities for all.

Financial Function

Your County 4-H Association is your fiscal agent, or “bank” for 4-H club funds if you do not have a 501c3 Foundation. The purpose of your association is two-fold:

1. Club Fiscal responsibility and accountability- verify that funds are being handled and used appropriately for programs that are educational and promote positive youth development.
2. Fundraising for total 4-H program- plan, execute and evaluate major fundraising efforts to support 4-H clubs, camps, and other related programming (such as leader training, awards and recognition, volunteer screening, youth scholarships to state events or camp). Priorities for fundraising should support priorities set by the advisory and expansion and review committees. Funds raised for 4-H programming should be housed in the county 182 account or the 171 account (171 accounts are for donations only).

Some counties may not have a separate 4-H Association account. In these cases, club funds are usually held within a 182 account or a 501c3 county foundation. If you are not sure what your county has, ask your County Extension Director (CED) and read over your county association bylaws and/or Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

Advisory Function

The purpose of your advisory committee is to **advise** and **advocate**. An effective and well-developed advisory committee is made up of a people who represent the diverse needs of your county and who have the knowledge needed to provide the best recommendations for your 4-H program to grow in a sustainable way. As advisors, your committee can help identify needs and issues, target audiences, strategies to reach those targeted audiences, and help you navigate any cultural differences that need to be understood before developing your programs.

The advisory committee also can act as advocates for the 4-H program, particularly when faculty are unable to speak, or do not have the trust or access to the community that the committee member has.

COUNTY 4-H ASSOCIATIONS & ADVISORY

According to Florida's Sunshine Law, "Advisory boards and committees created by public agencies may be subject to the Sunshine Law, even though their recommendations are not binding upon the entities that create them." The dispositive question is whether the committee has been delegated "decision-making authority," as opposed to mere "information-gathering or fact-finding authority." Where the committee has been delegated decision-making authority, the committee's meetings must be open to public scrutiny, regardless of the review procedures eventually used by the traditional governmental body." Your advisory committee is **not** a "decision-making" authority. They provide recommendations, but it is up to you as the faculty lead (with guidance from your CED and 4-H RSA) to decide how to implement those recommendations. As such, your advisory committee agendas, minutes, and other communication are subject to public records requests.

Expansion & Review Committee

According to federal civil rights law, each county is required to have a 4-H Expansion and Review Committee. This committee should have minority representation, be geographically representative, and approximately one third of membership required to be youth. Its function is to monitor and review the status of equal opportunity and civil rights. Specific tasks include:

1. Delineating club geographic boundaries,
2. Identifying opportunities to expand programs to reach more minorities and underserved youth,
3. Assist clubs with All Reasonable Efforts to reflect parity within the communities they serve.

In addition to these tasks, Expansion and Review Committee members can serve as cultural guides to help 4-H build relationships with underserved communities and audiences. Because committee members are part of the local culture, they are aware of the deeper, more subtle issues facing the community.

County Associations & Civil Rights Documentation

Several aspects of your county association will need to be documented to comply with civil rights law. The purpose of this documentation is to ensure positive and proactive steps to include minority representation in and remove gender bias from our programming (eliminate present effects of past discrimination). Participation with your county association will need to be documented in your county's Civil Rights Microsoft TEAMS folder. Currently, documentation related to county associations, advisory committees, and expansion and review committees are housed in subfolder 3:

III.a- Advisory Board/Committee Membership Policies/Bylaws

- Copy of bylaws
- Copy of rotation system (often outlined in the bylaws)

III.b- Advisory Board/Committee Demographics

- List of committee members by race, ethnicity, and gender.
- All Reasonable Efforts taken to build committees/boards that are representative of the diverse population.
- Copies of solicitation, selection, and recruitment procedures/criteria for committee positions
- A narrative description of or a copy of any barrier analysis developed to address underrepresentation in UF Extension advisory boards and committees within extension.



Calhoun County 4-H

739

Youth

84

Volunteers

4-H Clubs

11

Top Projects



**Public
Speaking**



**Plant &
Animal
Sciences**



**Healthy
Living**

Calhoun County 4-H reaches 36% of the school age population annually through 4-H clubs, school enrichment, & day camps to help youth develop work & life skills related to their sparks. The program is youth focused, agent-led, and delivered by 84 volunteers.