North Dakota State University Extension
Annual Conference
and
Innovation Skill Building Experience

October 22-24, 2019

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Overview

The North Dakota State University-Extension (NDSU) Innovation Skill Building Experience (ISBE) occurred on October 22-24, 2019 as part of their annual fall conference. There were approximately 192 participants made up of educators, agents, specialists, administrators and Research Extension Center (REC) staff who worked together in 26 teams. To date this was the Impact Collaborative’s largest state event and as the evaluation results indicate, it was very successful.

One of the Impact Collaborative facilitators, Stacy Wang, had a positive experience at her facilitator training in January 2020 and brought the idea for hosting an ISBE home to NDSU Extension. Incorporating the ISBE into NDSU’s fall conference was a departure from their typical conference format of keynote speakers and concurrent sessions. During the design of the event, NDSU was respectful of much of the “business” work of the fall conference and included awards luncheons, business meetings, banquets and trade shows into their overall conference agenda.

Intended Outcomes

1. Create an environment where more interdisciplinary work will occur and result in interdisciplinary team plans
2. Develop program planning skills that incorporate innovation and design thinking
3. Provide some opportunities to explore how this work might integrate into the Program Evaluation and Reporting System (PEARS)
4. Teams will have an identified path forward, tangible take-aways and/or action plans for implementing next steps.

Design Elements

The design team, referenced below, established the intended outcomes and evaluation indicators for the learning experience, established teams that would work together during the conference, and helped design the format, working agenda and slide deck.
NDSU Design Team
- Elizabeth Cronin
- Susan Finneseth
- Dan Folske
- Alicia Harstad
- Cindy Klapperich
- Becky Koch
- Stacy Wang

Along with wanting to create an environment where innovative interdisciplinary work would occur, the design team also hoped to provide opportunities for colleagues to see connections to their Program Evaluation and Reporting System (PEARS). As planning progressed, the design team saw fewer opportunities to connect to PEARS based on a few factors. For instance, teams were assembled for the conference experience and some colleagues were working together for the first time. Therefore, the evaluation results for the PEARS intended outcome are weaker than other parts of the evaluation.

A unique highlight of the NDSU design is that their Extension Leadership Team (ELT) was committed to supporting the innovative team ideas that resulted from the conference. The ELT helped set the stage and frame the ISBE within the conference experience and were fully present throughout, participating as a 26th ELT team. They also committed to supporting the progress of some of the teams by selecting and awarding $5000 for up to six teams to continue their work.

Awarding Innovation
At the end of the second day, a member of each team was asked to provide a one-minute pitch of their team idea. Audience members used “clicker” technology to score each pitch using a Likert Scale in response to the following question:

“To what extent do you agree that this is a relevant idea that responds to a pressing community need in a unique way?”

The results of the real-time scoring were used to select ten teams who moved forward to a judging round of three-minute pitches on the third day. These pitches were evaluated by a
four-member panel of external partners, stakeholders and elected officials. The panel of judges scored each of the ten teams using the following criteria:

- Compelling
- Unique
- Meeting a need
- Organizational fit
- Clear ask
- Innovative solution

Once again, audience members used clicker technology to rate each of the ten team pitches. As a result, colleagues chose one “people’s choice” awardee and the panel of judges selected five additional teams for awards.

The NDSU ELT asked each of the selected teams to provide follow up information which included intended outcomes for their team work. All of the selected teams followed through with completing the requirements and have been awarded $5000 to continue their team work. These teams, their Impact Collaborative facilitators/coaches, team leaders and their ELT liaisons are referenced below.

Awarded Teams

Team 9 – Youth Mental Health
Ellen Bjelland, Ronda Grippentrog, Diane Hahn, Vanessa Hoines, Sue Isbell, Cindy Klapperich, Laura Knox, Christina Rittenbach, Debra Theurer
PI – Diane Hahn
ELT Liaison – Brad
Impact Collaborative Coach - Beth Welbes

Team 11 - Pest Control Methods and Managing Pesticide Resistance
Mark Boetel, Venkataramana Chapara, Caleb Dalley, Joe Ikley, Angie Johnson, Janet Knodel, Devan Leo, TJ Prochaska
PI – Joe Ikley
ELT Liaison – Charlie
Impact Collaborative Coach - David Keto
Team 17 - Public Disconnect from Agriculture
Elizabeth Cronin, Calla Edwards, Carrie Knutson, Sarah McNaughton, Andy Robinson, Gerald Stokka, Emily Trzpuc, Hannah Worral
PI – Calla Edwards
ELT Liaison – Brad
Impact Collaborative Coach - Annie Jones

Team 18 - Public Perception of NDSU Extension (People’s Choice)
Kelli Anderson, Emily Goff, Trisha Jessen, Mary Keena, Breana Kiser, Tom Peters, Katalin Quale, Acacia Stuckle, Stacy Wang
PI – Mary Keena
ELT Liaison – Lynette
Impact Collaborative Coach - Stacy Wang

Team 21 - Recruitment and Retention of Qualified NDSU Staff
Shana Forster, Sheldon Gerhardt, Alicia Harstad, Susan Milender, Joel Ransom, Chris Schauer, Meagan Scott Hoffman, Lee Tisor
PI – Sue Milender
ELT Liaison – Shana
Impact Collaborative Coach - Bev Coberly

Team 22 - Regenerative Agriculture / Conserving and Improving Soil Health
Chris Augustin, Jerry Bergman, Ben Geaumont, Katelyn Hain, Mike Ostlie, Tom Scherer, LoAyne Voigt
PI – Katelyn Hain
ELT Liaison – Chris
Impact Collaborative Coach - Jason Weigle

NDSU Facilitators and eXtension Staff
The NDSU Extension ISBE could not have been successful without the dedication and expertise of Impact Collaborative coaches, facilitators and staff. A few, Tira Adelman, John Porter, Kit Sanders and Beth Welbe led facilitation from the front of the room while the rest of the crew provided coaching support for each of the teams. Of course, these lines blurred a bit as the facilitators also provided coaching support and coaches also supported front of the room facilitation. It was truly a team
effort by a group of very strong facilitators. Several evaluative comments point to the strengths of the team.

- Tira Adelman, Pesticide Safety Education Funds Management Program Manager, eXtension Foundation
- Beverly Coberly, Chief Operating Officer, eXtension Foundation
- Jean Ann Fischer, Director of Nutrition Education Program, University of Nebraska - Lincoln
- Ashley Griffin, Program Manager, eXtension Foundation
- Molly Immendorf, Lead Impact Collaborative Design Manager, eXtension Foundation
- Annie Jones, Facilitator Manager, eXtension Foundation
- David Keto, Media Producer/Director, University of Wyoming Extension
- John Porter, Urban Agriculture, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
- Kittrane Sanders, Community and Rural Development Agent, North Carolina Extension
- Stacy Wang, Health, Nutrition and Exercise Sciences, NDSU Extension
- Aaron Weibe, Communications and Engagement Manager, eXtension Foundation
- Beth Welbes, Director of Program Planning and Assessment, University of Illinois Extension
- Jason Weigle, Community Vitality, University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Evaluation results (~n 121; 63% response rate)

1. Did we create an environment for interdisciplinary work and team planning to occur?

119 responses

- Strongly Agree: 44.5%
- Agree: 11.8%
- Somewhat Agree: 39.5%
- Do Not Agree: 4.2%
2. Did you develop program planning skills that incorporate innovation and design thinking?
120 responses

3. Did we provide opportunities to explore how this work might integrate into the Program Evaluation and Reporting System (PEARS)
119 responses
4. Do you and/or your team have an identified path forward, tangible take-aways and/or action plans for implementing next steps?
120 responses

5. What is your team number/name?
- 101 respondents provided either a team number or name.

6. In many instances, teams came together for the first time for the purpose of this event. How do you expect your team to proceed following the event?
118 responses

- It was great to work with my teammates during the annual conference, but I doubt that I/we will continue to work to...
- We developed some great ideas at the annual conference and we will stay connected in the short-term as an ad...
- I can see many of my teammates staying together to further develop our...
- Our team is committed to carrying this project forward and achieving project...
7. I will recommend the Impact Collaborative Innovation Skill-Building Experience event to others. (121 responses)

- 77.7% of respondents indicated “yes”
- 12.4% of respondents indicated “no”
- 9.9% of respondents indicated “maybe” or provided some form of qualifier like:
  - “Depends on the situation”
  - “Yes, though it needs some modifications”
  - “Neutral. Pros and cons”

8. Please indicate your intention to use any of the information presented in the Innovation Skill-Building Experience event: (120 responses)

- 28.3% of respondents said, “I will definitely use the information”
- 44.2% of respondents said, “I will probably use the information”
- 20.8% of respondents said, “I have not decided if I will use this information”
- 4.2% of respondents said, “I probably will not use this information”
- 2.5% of respondents said, “I definitely will not use this information”

9. What was your biggest take-away from the Innovation Skill Building Experience? (78 responses)

- 25 of the respondents commented on the design thinking process and approach.
  - “Using a process to put together a program that could be a game changer”
  - “Be patient in the process. The beginning was frustrating because I wanted to jump to the ideas step...but I can see why the process was the way it was”
  - “How to go through the brainstorming process and developing an idea”
  - “The thought process and the structure in the workbook”

- 17 respondents commented on being engaged, working with colleagues and the value of team building. Of these, there were three comments expressing appreciation for working across disciplines.
- “The chance to interact across disciplines and experience was impactful”
- “Getting to work with colleagues that I would’ve typically not gotten to work with”
- “True collaboration when people listen to each other with open minds, is powerful”
- “Getting to hear what our ag agents wanted for publications and lessons to use with the producers”
- “I benefited from the exercise by working with new people and working through differences of opinion and group dynamics challenges to form a workable plan”

- 10 respondents commented on the value of the process in achieving program planning objectives
  - “The process of program development”
  - “I will use this in program planning and development”

- 10 respondents mentioned specific curriculum elements. Curriculum elements were mentioned in this order:
  - Why (5 comments)
    - “The need to figure out the “why” in order to get to the best ‘what’ or ‘how’”
  - Bad Idea (2 comments)
    - “Bad ideas can be great ideas!”
  - Zen, Choose your Adventure, Spaghetti Model (1 comment each)

- 2 respondents mentioned the value of coaches.
  - “Having a mentor/coach integrated in the group helps a lot when your group gets stuck and/or needs direction”

- 8 respondents provided assorted positive comments.
  - “Post-it App, visioning a program”
  - “The exercise contained many features of the grant-writing process. The steps we carried out during the training was much more calculated than my usual approach. I will use the process and incorporate the step-wise approach into my next grant writing exercise.”
  - “Refreshing way to host a conference”
- “Great experience”
- “Fast paced”
- “It is a cultural change, not financial”
- “Our program!”
- “Great experience!”

- 3 respondents expressed frustrations.
  - “Too much facilitation interrupts discussion. Hard to avoid with limited time but made it frustrating”
  - “You cannot force innovative ideas by assigning relative strangers to a group that has nothing in common”
  - “Noise level made it difficult to concentrate or hear other members. I could hear those at the table to my rear easier than the members of my team across the table.”

10. Did you get what you needed over the last three days? (115 responses)

- 67.8% of respondents indicated “yes”
- 20% of respondents indicated “no”
- 12.2% of respondents provided “other” responses, the majority of which indicated that they missed opportunities for networking with colleagues who were not at their table a few others indicated that they lacked professional time and support to complete the work that is needed in a quality manner

11. If no, or other, what would have improved your experience? (31 responses)

- 9 respondents expressed desire for the traditional conference format.
  - “I miss the subject matter discussions at fall conference”
  - “Have some time for field of work professional development”
  - “Time for some more traditional conference activities”

- 6 respondents mentioned difficulties related to their team dynamics or topic.
- “More diverse group. It had 1 agent and 6 REC and 1 specialist.”
- “Would have been nice to work with neighboring counties on a project so we could have something we could actually use when we go home”
- “This is my first conference so I wasn’t sure what to expect. My team was very broad and difficult to innovate but it was still informative and a great experience.”
- “Genuine respect and appreciation for each other’s ideas.”

- 5 respondents referred to timing or being too rushed.
  - “More time to hone the pitch and settle on an idea”
  - “I wish some of the break outs were longer. Granted, the meeting planners from NDSU had agenda items they wanted to incorporate around training. However, I feel we were rushed on time for certain steps. More time would have helped to get closure on various chapters / steps along the way.”

- 4 respondents thought that better/different coaching would have improved their experience.
  - “Our coach was largely absent.”
  - “My group was lucky in that a ‘trainer’ was essentially embedded into our team. Other teams were not as fortunate and I wonder how they succeeded.”
  - “A team coach from NDSU Extension who would pull us back together from time to time”

- 4 respondents mentioned the meeting space.
  - “Less static and less noisy areas to work”
  - “A bigger room”
  - “More time, quieter environment” (also counted in the ‘time’ theme)

- 3 respondents referred to the process and content itself.
  - “It was a bit complicated and too fast to digest. Too many acronyms and equations. Please simplify.”
  - “I don’t need the cutesy breaks”
  - “Since our team didn’t move forward, it left our task unanswered without future movement forward”
- 3 respondents made general or neutral comments.
  - “It was great”
  - “Beef as a meat choice for meals”
  - “Not sure how to answer this”

- 1 respondent indicated a lack of time to follow through.
  - “The option to form a plan as a learning experience without being required to carry the program on as an actual activity (if it doesn’t fit into our time budget).”

12. What additional help does your team need? (60 responses)
   - Check-ins with my team coach (31 responses)
   - Check-ins with my institution’s Innovation Facilitator (Stacy Wang) (30 responses)
   - 11 respondents also filled in “other” comments which ranged from, “none,” “both,” “not sure,” and “uninterrupted team time”

13. Do you have any additional thoughts, comments, feedback or shout-outs to someone/something you’d like to share? If so, please share below. (34 responses)

Responses in this section tended to include more than one topic, two examples follow:

- “I liked the format, resources, activities, groups, etc. I feel like we would all be more motivated if we had say $1,000.00 we had to spend to further our cause. I don’t feel we needed a competition to make this work. I feel like farm and ranch stress is probably the most talked about need and yet we didn’t bring home prize money so we likely will not work together like we might have with even a small amount of money. Drop the team awards and the years of service awards. Just do the two or three awards for people outside of Extension. That business drags on way to long, the teams are huge and the photos could be done away from the luncheon. It was difficult to find times to visit with all of the workgroups and that one more lunch time would have really helped to network. I felt it was a very worthwhile conference. Working with the ag agents was needed. Thank you to the committee for following through on a promise to
be innovative and provide quality opportunities to share across programs. I am looking forward to more of this type of learning."

- “I sincerely appreciate the effort and innovation in trying this with our group once, and I think it will yield some excellent, impactful programming. However, I prefer the long-standing and beneficial format for our statewide Extension conferences, where there are multiple trainings/professional development opportunities, which I have benefited from for many years while at NDSU. All Extension personnel were ordered/required to participate in the IC exercise. Although it was a helpful learning experience, we were, in practice, forced into developing programs irrespective of whether we have time or room within our programs to actually carry them out. My team and I worked in a sincere and effective manner, and our project was selected. I appreciate the offering of modest start-up funds for the selected teams; however, we should have the option to decline the offer if we don’t feel we have time to add it to our already-full programs/schedules. If I fully engage with our team going forward, my existing research and Extension programs will likely suffer, and I already spend much more time on the Extension portion of my appointment than on research, even though I have a relatively small Extension responsibility in accordance with my position description. Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback. I offer all of it in a sincere spirit.”

- 13 respondents referenced the program and/or the conference structure and format. Six of the responses were positive in nature, five were negative and one respondent provided both positive and negative elements of the format.
  - “Be cognizant that this process is a living nightmare for classical introverts” (negative)
  - “More research updates from the REC” (negative)
  - “I do think that this was a great way to establish some fast response to state issues and should be some part of every conference but not the whole conference. It should be a part of program planning at conference.” (neutral)
  - “Loved the structure of this conference. Much better than the traditional breakout sessions.” (positive)
  - “This was great! Enjoyed the format!” (positive)
- 7 respondents mentioned "time" with three sub-themes including the process itself, pitches and adding to existing work loads.
  - “Really found the process interesting and I wish it could have been a little bit longer”
  - “Useful. More time for pitch prep needed.”
  - “I think we need to think about adding to existing work loads a little more when structuring the teams.”

- 5 respondents referenced outcomes.
  - “People were confused the first day by the end product needed”
  - “I will take what I learned and use it in my everyday work”
  - “I hope the ideas actually survive, incubate, and develop into real efforts”

- 5 respondents referred to specific topics, teams or issues.
  - “One thing that might have been helpful is having some ‘timely’ topics on the list...we really need to do some work on the current ag situation...this would have been a great forum to do that”
  - “I enjoyed the innovation process, I think it would be fun to do this in our former MPUs or more locally to partner on issues with our colleagues in close proximity”
  - “This system worked well for our team, but I know that it didn’t work for others”

- 5 respondents made positive comments about eXtension, facilitators and coaches.
  - “The coaches were great, thank you for a great first time experience”
  - “Tira and John were fantastic...the lightheartedness really made the conference”
  - “The eXtension team is great. Thank you to them and the conference committee for this unique experience.”

- 4 respondents reference pitches - one positive, one negative and two related to time (time references were also included in another topic section).
  - “It would have been more of a skill development event if we could just develop a pitch together and go through the process. To get the pitch together we had to ignore the process and didn’t really learn it.”
  - “The last day was the best... really enjoyed the pitches!”

- 4 respondents made generally positive comments.
  - “It was outstanding”
- “Loved this experience”

- 3 respondents referenced the venue.
  - “I really like where the event was held”
  - “Acoustics was hard to hear with all tables talking at once”
  - “Venue was great. Way better than holiday inn.”

- 2 respondents thanked the conference committee and these comments were included in previous examples.

- 1 respondent commented on judging diversity."
  - “Judges need to be diverse”

Conclusion
Several factors contributed to making this a successful Innovation Skill Building Experience.

1. Positive and supportive design team - From the beginning of our work together, the design team had a positive and optimistic outlook for incorporating the Innovation Skill Building Experience into NDSU Extension’s Fall Conference. They were thoughtful about the intended outcomes and resulting evaluation plan and intentional about putting together interdisciplinary teams who would come together for the first time at the conference around unifying topics. First and foremost, their positive attitudes and approaches carried throughout the conference and resulted in a positive learning experience for participants.

2. Involved, supportive and encouraging Extension Leadership Team - A dedicated leadership team who is not only present, but involved and supportive, throughout the event is key to its success. Dr. Lardy, Interim Director, framed the importance of innovation at the beginning of the conference and his compelling examples from constituents in the field emphasized why innovative Extension work is critical to the people we serve. The ELT worked together as a team during the event and provided incentives for team work to continue. Because ELT members are serving as liaisons to the awarded teams, their commitment and support will continue well beyond the event.
3. Involvement of external stakeholders - Teams pitched their innovative project ideas to a panel of external stakeholders made up of partners and elected officials. Doing so “raised the bar” for teams to work together effectively to develop innovative solutions to compelling community needs. Stakeholders were engaged in a meaningful way and allowed them to see innovative planning in action. Selected teams followed through with completing the requirements for their awards and had the opportunity to review their projects through a partner lens.

4. Facilitators and coaches - Finally, and certainly not least, the care, commitment and expertise of the facilitators and coaches made this a successful experience. Several members had played significant roles in facilitating, coaching and supporting the Impact Collaborative Summit that occurred the week prior to the NDSU ISBE and were surely tired and missing their families. Participants would have never known this was the case, however, because they showed up to the event prepared, energized and committed to making this event a positive experience for participants. As many evaluative comments indicate, the teams would not have been as successful if not for the coaches and facilitators. They set a high bar for future events with the quality of their coaching and presentations!