

CSREES' Response to Education Portfolio External Panel Report

CSREES Education Portfolio Team

2009



Today, the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service's (CSREES) Education Portfolio is in a state of transition. The Agency is working to become more programmatically oriented as it responds to pertinent information about the shifting internal and external challenges of educating tomorrow's scientists and educators. Additionally, much has changed since the end of the Education Portfolio Self Assessment. Changes in National Program Leader (NPL) personnel, Science and Education Resources Development (SERD) leadership, the impending creation of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and a new administration that is identifying government priorities for education have all provided fertile ground for the recommendations to the education portfolio assessment. Some of the recommendations, anticipated by CSREES, were underway by the time the Panel report was delivered. In other cases, the recommendations have provided clarity and weight to an environment that is ripe for change.



800 9th Street, SW
3310 Waterfront Centre
Washington, DC 20024
(202) 720-0480
(202) 720-3945

CSREES' Response to External Panel Report

Overview:

The External Panel review of CSREES' Education Portfolio Self Assessment was held in January 2009 and their report received in March. The ten-member panel, made up of education experts from CSREES' institutional partners, delivered a comprehensive and insightful set of recommendations that will serve to guide CSREES as it crafts a more comprehensive agenda for education within the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA).

The report is structured using the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Research and Development Evaluation Criteria of Relevance, Quality and Performance. For each evaluation criterion, the Panel provided general comments, strengths, challenges and a set of recommendations. The report also contains a set of 10 recommendations to CSREES (the Agency) – five on issues common to all CSREES portfolio reviews and five unique to the Education Portfolio.

A specific methodology was employed by SERD in formulating the Agency's response to the Panel's recommendations. First, the recommendations were grouped by type. Recommendations concerning agency policy or administration were assigned to SERD's Deputy Administrator and Directors and Programmatic recommendations were assigned to individual SERD National Program Leaders (NPLs) for review. Written responses were then collectively discussed and revised by SERD program staff concerned with the Education Portfolio. This section, representing CSREES' response to the Panel's report, is divided into two parts. The first part is a general discussion of the Panel's recommendations. The second, located in the appendix, contains SERD's actual responses to each individual recommendation in the Panel's report.

Today, CSREES' Education Portfolio is in a state of transition. The Agency is working to become more programmatically oriented as it responds to pertinent information about the shifting internal and external challenges of educating tomorrow's scientists and educators. Additionally, much has changed since the end of the education portfolio self assessment. Changes in NPL personnel, SERD leadership, the impending creation of NIFA and a new administration that is identifying government priorities for

education have all provided fertile ground for the recommendations to the education portfolio assessment. Some of the recommendations, anticipated by CSREES, were underway by the time the Panel report was delivered. In other cases, the recommendations have provided clarity and weight to an environment that is ripe for change.

In order to concentrate on the substance and spirit of the Panel's recommendations, the original recommendations are organized into seven broad categories:

- 1 Strategic Planning and Prioritization of Activities and Initiatives
- 2 Stakeholder Input
- 3 Evaluation Indicators, Matrices and Outcome Reporting
- 4 Program Funding Increases and Realignment
- 5 Increased Focus on K-12 programs
- 6 Programmatic Leadership
- 7 Diversity – Focus on Minority Serving Institutions, Collaborators and Students

CSREES' National Education Program Leaders strongly agree that more attention to these broad categories is important to advancing the cause of education in the food and agricultural sciences. The Agency's response to the Panel's recommendations follows:

Response to Panel's Recommendations:

1. STRATEGIC PLANNING: Agreement is unanimous that education needs to be more prominent in the department, the Agency and within individual grant programs. A complete strategic planning process will take at least a year to complete, be dependent upon the final configuration of the National Institute and continue to be revised and refined as programs change and stakeholders provide input. The initial elements of strategic planning for education are already underway at the unit programmatic level and will accelerate as key positions within SERD are filled. Two such positions, Education Analyst and Director of Higher Education will be hired soon. Two specialist positions are currently being advertized. The Director of the International Programs who was on a detail assignment has returned and the status of the Deputy Administrator will become clearer when the Agency completes its transition to the National Institute. Stakeholder positions featured at SERD workshops such as the 2009 reports from The Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) *Human Capital Development* and The National Academies Report on *Transforming Agricultural Education for a Changing World* have given renewed impetus to the need for strategic planning for education programs.

The Panel recommended that CSREES develop an agreed upon working definition of 'Education' for purposes of program development. NPLs agree, and while there are legislative and administrative provisions that define and describe education and capacity building, the strategic planning process should facilitate an agency-wide consensus on good working definitions.

The lack of prioritization for education programs by the Agency and SERD was noted in the Panel's report. NPLs agree this is a high priority and one that is being actively embraced by SERD on behalf of the Agency. Senior Leadership and SERD NPLs have moved quickly on a much needed prioritization of education activities for CSREES. Ongoing activities include:

- **A roadmap for the education portfolio**
- **Developing an agency-wide strategic plan for education**
- **Stakeholder workshops to establish agency-wide education priorities**
- **Reclassification of education program knowledge areas**
- **Request for Applications (RFA) changes to elicit education indicators and more targeted outcomes**
- **Post award monitoring of award reporting to elicit better outcomes**
- **More intensive stakeholder involvement and documentation**
- **Creation of RFA review teams to ensure an education emphasis in all grant programs**

These efforts need more engaged leadership and follow-up and represent a renewed awareness and a more intensive approach to help rebuilding America's capacity to educate the next generation of food and agricultural scientists and educators. These efforts are being integrated into NPL program thinking and activities with senior leadership moving decisively to provide encouragement for NPLs to continue this process in their individual grant programs. The short-term agenda is to develop an agreed upon set of education goals and outcomes that relate to action items that can be immediately put in place while the long term strategic planning and stakeholder input processes get more fully developed.

2. STAKEHOLDER INPUT: The recommendation for more extensive stakeholder input was woven throughout the entire Panel Report and has been embraced enthusiastically by NPLs. Prior to the education portfolio exercise, CSREES leadership made it clear that stakeholder input was to be a high priority across all program units, RFAs and grant award programs. Stakeholder input is now expected to be extensive, well documented, publically available and incorporated, to the extent that legislation and common sense allow, into program planning and implementation. Within the Education Portfolio, a number of steps have been taken to be proactive with stakeholders and strive for more meaningful input and collaboration. Agency Portfolio leaders have sought out education experts and fostered active NPL participation and dialogue on critical issues that concern the future of education in the food and

agricultural sciences. Travel and program evaluation funds are more available. Program Leaders are encouraged to engage more aggressively in professional development activities, conferences, to attend workshops and conduct Program Director listening sessions. One example of the value of stakeholder input was the decision to include the 1890 Land-Grant faculty on the 1890 Capacity Building Review Panels. This suggestion came directly from a meeting between SERD and the 1890 Research and Extension Administrators who felt that the Agency was unfairly restricting 1890 staff from its Capacity Review Panels.

Additionally, the education roadmap and strategic plan will include ways to engage new stakeholders through social networking media like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. The Agency will increase e-Collaborations with new Digital Native stakeholders in food and agriculture with Web 2.0 to advance learning and training.

3. EVALUATION INDICATORS, MATRICES AND OUTCOME REPORTING: The self assessment report admitted to the lack of real indicators and the Panel made strong recommendations that this be corrected. NPLs consider this a high priority that will require dedicated time and personnel to working out the details. The identification of meaningful education matrices is a challenging recommendation to implement. Action on this recommendation will most likely start once the Education Analyst and Director for Higher Education Programs are hired. In the meantime, there are plans by individual NPLs to incorporate stronger language on reporting, evaluation criteria and indicators of success into the 2010 RFAs. The process of cross-RFA development should provide a good opportunity for NPLs to avail themselves of the collective thinking of Agency experts. Better stakeholder engagement will also help to ensure that requirements placed on institutions to collect indicators are acceptable and appropriate. Education indicators of success and outcome reporting are characteristically elusive and this will require redoubled efforts on the part of CSREES to make this a more meaningful aspect of grant programs and funded activities.

The Panel also recommended that increased dissemination of many of the educational program results be addressed and that SERD work with the appropriate CSREES units to find ways to make this happen. Better reporting of impacts and accomplishments is actively being worked on at the Agency level and will be a key component of a strategic plan for education. The Agency is developing better grant award reporting mechanisms such as the new 'REEPort' (formerly One Solution) and making plans to utilize the agency website more effectively to visibly demonstrate outcomes of CSREES supported education

activities and to create learning and training communities of practice around issues of increasing educational attainment. SERD has developed a comprehensive data tracking system but it needs to be linked to accountability for achieving education outcomes. Funding from the Agency to assess the 1994 Tribal programs is underway but a more creative source of periodic funding opportunities for other program level assessments needs to be developed.

The Panel recommendations pointed to a greater role for the Food and Agriculture Education Information System (FAEIS) database in capturing outcomes and indicators of success. They also advocated for an independent FAEIS advisory group to help SERD develop its matrices and indicators. The intent of this recommendation is unclear as FAEIS is a voluntary database that captures data such as graduation rate, faculty salary, and student enrollment statistics. It is not tied in any way to CSREES grant programs. It is also not intended to capture outcomes or indicators of success.

4. PROGRAM FUNDING INCREASES AND REALIGNMENT: It is agreed that this is a very important recommendation and one that NPLs feel can be addressed by the Agency in a number of ways. Funding for education and capacity building programs is specifically prescribed by Congress. Increases or changes in program funding are generally addressed by congressional legislation or by the appropriation process and not an area where the Agency can directly lobby. However, there are a few ways of engaging in the process that can be highly effective. A roadmap or strategic plan that has key stakeholder input and backing can inform the Agency's budget request. As NPLs identify and artfully articulate critical needs, the case for additional program funding can be made by those in a position to do so. By strategic collaboration with other programs and departments, NPLs have, as in the case of facilities funding, been able to help client institutions leverage additional programmatic funds.

5. INCREASED FOCUS ON K-12 PROGRAMS: NPLs agree this is an increasingly important program area, especially at minority serving institutions and for underserved populations. K-12 programs get limited funding, have legislative restrictions and often require a specific faculty skill set. The Agency will therefore engage stakeholders to help take advantage of existing RFA flexibility on NIFA programs having a potential K-12 audience. One idea is to develop innovative cooperative support agreements with other Federal agencies having similar program emphasis supporting STEAM education. A good indicator of the importance of K-12 comes from the various capacity building grant program proposals. Increasingly, applications are being submitted that have solid K-12 programs that reach ever younger students to help them demonstrate technical and functional competencies in science, math and in the

food and agriculture sciences. Developing teacher trainer programs and curricula modules for high school, middle school and even primary education is essential in improving recruitment and retention of students in degree programs that SERD grants help to establish. However, not all of NIFA's funding programs will have the authority to address K-12 education and it will be important to collaborate with those programs that do.

6. PROGRAMMATIC LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT WITHIN SERD: NPLs agree this is a high priority and critical to the future of education programs within NIFA. While the Panel's recommendations were vague on some aspects, several recommendations were clearly articulated. The recommendation that NPLs receive more training in managing grant programs and sharpen their exposure and understanding of cutting edge education and learning research is welcomed. The Panel recommends that program alignment with the current state of knowledge and science and use of cutting edge methodology would be enhanced by better NPL skill upgrades. Training of SERD staff, while still an individual exercise, has increased greatly and a more coordinated unit training plan needs to be created. Fostering an environment where program development, engagement and implementation are restored to a level equal to that of other units within CSREES is also welcomed. An engaged NIFA leadership on education issues is emerging and will take time to more fully develop.

The Panel made specific recommendations concerning SERD's organizational structure and communications, NPL involvement in grant management minutiae and comparable NPL recognition of work complexity by the Agency. Within SERD, work responsibilities are being shifted to a more equitable work distribution between program specialists and staff who should be carrying more of the administrative load in grants processing. Recognition of NPL work complexity is a topic that has generated interest and one that will be raised and dealt with by the National Institute.

7. DIVERSITY AND MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS (MSI): This recommendation was unequivocally embraced by the NPLs – keep a focus on Minority Serving Institutions as CSREES transitions into NIFA and not allow the programs to be dispersed within the broader unit programs. MSI program legislation and administrative provisions are quite specific and clear. The challenge for the education portfolio, whether as a discreet unit or dispersed within NIFA, will be to deepen the capacity of the MSI to compete more competitively within the broader family of CSREES grant programs. At the outset, NPLs will need to ensure that NIFA has a coherent policy clearly articulating the unique needs of MSI and underserved populations