

# Virtual Education Task Force

## Discovering Lessons Learned

Short-Term Deliverable

June 19, 2020

Report prepared by:

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## Introduction

Iowa State University Extension and Outreach responded rapidly when COVID-19 was confirmed in Iowa and the university and state placed restrictions on face-to-face meetings. We canceled or postponed meetings and closed offices, but we also “virtualized” many educational offerings. We found different ways to connect with volunteers, participants, and partners. We also had to find different ways to get our work done within ISU Extension and Outreach. We could not travel to meetings, brainstorm over a cup of coffee, or build a relationship with a new colleague. Yet all those things occurred, some more successfully than others.

At the same time, our stakeholders, both our regular and potential users, found the answers to their questions and were educated and informed by also doing things differently. They adjusted, as did we. Once Iowa reopens, recovery begins, and restrictions are reduced, how will Iowans find information and receive informal education and how will ISU Extension and Outreach do its work? Which functions will return to in-person delivery? Which will not? What hybrids will emerge? Are there best practices for virtual delivery that can be shared and replicated? What can we learn from failed attempts? What additional skills, platforms, assistance, etc., are necessary if virtual delivery remains long term?

## The Charge

As Iowa reopens, ISU Extension and Outreach needs to apply the lessons learned to build a stronger position in a post-pandemic world. Vice President Lawrence assembled a task force to evaluate the current state of virtual learning within extension and identify ISU Extension and Outreach’s opportunities and challenges relative to virtual and digital education.

## Task Force Members

Facilitation provided by Deb Sellers

Brenda Allen  
Kristi Elmore  
Robin Ertz  
Jed Findlay  
Jade Hargrafen  
Lori Hayungs  
Sue Henderson

Terry Janssen  
Billie Koester  
Dan Loy  
Andrea Nelson  
Debbie Nistler  
Darla Olson  
Aubrey Robertson

Cayla Taylor  
Deb Tootle  
Aimee Viniard-Weideman

## Defining Successes and Challenges

Subcommittee:

Robin Ertz, Terry Janssen, Cayla Taylor, and Deb Tootle

The VETF identified successful undertakings and challenges related to virtual learning efforts that emerged as the COVID-19 pandemic closed face-to-face extension program delivery. As the team identified and began to document the successes and challenges associated with these activities, it became apparent that successes and challenges could be organized around delivery method, program content, and timing/responsiveness.

### Successes

#### Delivery Method

Programs from each of the ISU Extension and Outreach educational units were successfully converted to online or alternative delivery processes in response to restrictions imposed by COVID-19. Some state and county staff rapidly learned to use new technology. Virtual programming was offered to reach audiences using multiple online delivery platforms including, but not limited to, Zoom, WebEx, Adobe Connect, Facebook Live, and podcasts. Utilizing both synchronous and asynchronous methodologies for educational delivery allowed extension professionals to match learning technologies to the needs and comfort levels of targeted audiences. Efforts to deliver educational programs in engaging formats helped to build a sense of community among groups of learners. Several educational offerings were closed-captioned, recorded, and transcribed with accessibility in mind.

#### Virtual Program Development

In a competitive virtual learning environment, consumers have access to an overwhelming number of educational resources, trainings, and virtual offerings. Despite the necessity of a rapid transition to virtual delivery methods and the need for new educational content related to the pandemic, ISU Extension and Outreach worked diligently to ensure that the organization's educational offerings continued to be relevant, credible, and research and/or evidence-based, and included timely information.

#### Timing/Responsiveness

ISU Extension and Outreach quickly transitioned many educational programs, events, and trainings to a virtual delivery as a result of COVID-19. The organization worked collaboratively to be flexible and responsive to the rapidly changing professional, learning, and social environments affecting ISU Extension and Outreach and its clientele. Each of the programming areas developed and made available to the public new resources for living with and adjusting to challenging circumstances precipitated by COVID-19.

## Challenges

### Delivery Method

The ability and comfortability of both the instructor and learner in using online learning technologies was identified as a challenge for some. Additionally, the lack of access to broadband internet has made delivery of virtual learning and participation difficult. Digital accessibility as well as language and resource accessibility created barriers in delivering programs. It also became clear that not all ISU Extension and Outreach staff statewide have the equipment and training needed to lead engaging, virtual learning. Our organization is focused on empowering and supporting people—their communities, families, and economies. Working to build trusting, engaging relationships with clientele at a distance can be challenging.

### Virtual Program Development

ISU Extension and Outreach worked to provide educational content to meet the needs of all learners using multiple platforms, consistent communication, and ongoing educational resources and training. Further program evaluation will help us determine success of the programming and the virtual delivery methods. Additionally, the development of research-based educational resources takes time to develop well. So much time was spent learning virtual delivery platforms, that less time was available to create new, research-based programs. Some educational programs that required hands-on or experiential learning were not as readily adapted for virtual delivery.

### Timing/Responsiveness

While there are many examples of ISU Extension and Outreach professionals stepping up to meet clientele needs virtually, it takes significant time to create high quality educational programs and even longer to deliver these programs virtually. A great deal of time is needed to learn the virtual learning platforms, create or adjust the content, and develop the content to be digitally and linguistically accessible. Staff identified feeling the overwhelming need to be a “jack of all trades” related to content development, delivery, and troubleshooting in order to best serve clientele virtually. Program development and delivery have been shown to be innovative and adaptable. Virtual learning in response to COVID-19 garnered significant interest.

## Virtual or Digital Strategies

Subcommittee members:

Brenda Allen, Kristi Elmore, Billie Koester, and Aimee Viniard-Weideman

The committee was asked to identify four to six successful virtual or digital strategies that ISU Extension and Outreach implemented during COVID-19 that should be sustained or expanded in a post-pandemic environment across programmatic units and county services. For the purposes of this task force, the subcommittee has defined a

strategy as a plan of action designed to achieve a major or overall goal of the organization.

Prior to the pandemic, these strategies in virtual educational offerings may have been present but had been neither identified nor prioritized by the organization as system-wide strategies. Now they are recognized as successful strategies in virtual education that should continue. Based on these successes, the committee recommends the following strategies for system-wide implementation in virtual education.

### Short Term Strategies

1. **Collaboration:** Draw upon internal and external expertise to collaboratively deliver responsive programming.
2. **Technology:** Utilize a variety of digital platforms and tools to best meet clients' needs.
3. **Commitment:** Invest in technology through professional development, research, equipment, and support.
4. **Learner-centered:** Consider and utilize effective delivery modes (i.e. content and pedagogy) to best match the educational offering with the audience needs.
5. **Accessibility:** Incorporate digital accessibility into the content and delivery.
6. **Innovation:** Respond to the need to quickly transition educational programs to an online or alternative learning format.

## Identify Virtual Education Resources

Subcommittee:

Robin Ertz, Lori Hayungs, Andrea Nelson, and Darla Olson

VETF was charged with identifying who should be involved with organizing, prioritizing, planning, and determining evaluation methods for these strategies.

Virtual education within ISU Extension and Outreach will continue to evolve. VETF can establish strategies and goals for the organization, but technology will continue to change, and specific topics may be better suited to different platforms. With this need for flexibility comes the question of how our system establishes best practices and evaluates new methods and platforms.

The task force proposes that a Virtual Education Advisory Team (VEAT) be established to evaluate offerings and make recommendations for future virtual strategies. The main function of the VEAT would be to provide leadership within extension programming to move the strategies proposed by the Virtual Education Task Force forward. The following table provides recommended areas of expertise to be represented on this team.

The VEAT is encouraged to work with groups internal and external to the university who may provide additional insight into virtual learning best practices. We also recommend that the VEAT establish a main point of contact or core team to facilitate requests.

<b>Skill Set/Area of Expertise</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Consult and advise others on the best tools to use for their virtual education needs	Instructional designers across extension
Provide connection between electronic accessibility needs (live captioning, after the fact captioning, ensuring accessible documents, etc.) and those that can provide it	e-Accessibility Core Team, Advancement
Reach underserved populations, flexibility in delivery mode, keeping in mind cultural norms	Community and Economic Development, Latinx specialist
Provide expertise in market analysis and needs assessment	Specialists across extension
Provide expertise in instructional design	Instructional designers across extension
Provide expertise in evaluation methods	Program evaluation specialists across extension
Create linkages between PD needs - related to technology - and resources available	Professional Development
Provide expertise in video	Advancement
Provide expertise in social media as an educational platform	Social media specialist
Provide expertise in learning management systems (Moodle)	Extension IT
Help in technical support (helping clients)	Extension IT Hotline

Provide expertise in virtual education delivery and/or facilitation	Conference Planning and Management, Extension IT, Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, instructional designers, Professional Development, Advancement, and resources outside ISU Extension and Outreach
Event registration and management	Conference Planning and Management
Branding	Advancement
County representation	County staff representative
Regional representation	Regional director representative

## Dissemination of Strategies

The Virtual Education Task Force (VETF) was asked to determine how to best disseminate the identified successful digital/virtual strategies across our system. Before we began, we discussed whether the virtual strategies will be made public or whether they will be internal to ISU Extension and Outreach. Although there were some concerns that it may be difficult to keep information up to date, the VETF decided that it would be beneficial to share information publicly with stakeholders. Making the report (or significant parts of it) available to external partners demonstrates the commitment, as well as the depth and breadth of the efforts, being made by ISU Extension and Outreach to position ourselves to be stronger going forward from the COVID-19 pandemic. However, VETF members agreed that some components of the reports may remain internal to ISU Extension and Outreach.

The VETF identified several avenues for widespread dissemination of the virtual strategies. Information could be communicated through announcements during:

- Dr. Lawrence’s weekly updates
- Second Monday Live webinars
- Area-wide extension meetings
- Extension council meetings
- ISU Extension and Outreach unit-specific meetings

In addition, information from this report could be made available on several webpages in the short-term:

- Office of the Vice President Initiatives
- MyExtension

## **Next Steps**

The next charge to the task force includes envisioning what ISU Extension and Outreach needs to do to be proactively positioned to respond to the emerging needs of lowans relative to how they desire to access informal education in a post-pandemic world. This includes determining the needed strategic investments related to hardware, software, capacity, training, marketing, and other items as determined by the taskforce. The next report and recommendations are due to the Leadership team August 1.

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