Responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic:

Using the Policy, Systems, and Environmental Framework to Understand Washington State's Approach

By Rebecca Sero, Laura Rÿser, Hannah Brause, Caroline Backman, and Clea Rome

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced Extension to quickly adjust its efforts and methods of program delivery in order to be responsive to the needs of the community. This shift was primarily focused on finding ways to continue to offer traditional, direct education Extension programs, such as 4-H and Master Gardeners, while adhering to the restrictions put in place. There was also a subset of work that took a broader approach to addressing the issues arising from the pandemic: focused instead on how Extension could help mitigate what those in the community were facing by working towards making changes in the policies, systems, and physical environments. This brief will explore how Washington State University Extension applied this broader approach in order to respond to the needs of the greater community, along with how data collection methods were used to inform University Administration and the community at large about Extension's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Policy, Systems, and Environmental (PSE) Framework emerged during the previous decade as a method to tackle complex health issues, such as diabetes (Lyn, 2013). More recently, PSE has been used to address concerns within the community development arena (Rÿser, et al, 2020). By addressing policies (written statements), systems (practices, typically unwritten), and the environment (visible changes to infrastructure or assets), the framework is focused on work that occurs at the broader community stage. Cheadle, et al. (2016) described PSE as "a portfolio of strategies at multiple levels (e.g., individual, family, community) across multiple sectors (e.g., school, worksite, neighborhood)."

"Using a PSE Framework creates community-level impacts while addressing complex issues, both within a COVID-19 context as explored here, as well as beyond."

The Project's Beginnings

The Administrative Team for Washington State University (WSU) Extension realized early in the COVID-19 pandemic that faculty and staff were having to dramatically pivot their work in order to adequately address emerging issues and change their foci. In April 2020, the Evaluation Specialist began a weekly collection of these changes to see where efforts were being directed. The data collection instrument was initiated for three reasons: (1) to help WSU Administration understand where there might be opportunities to assist; (2) to help coordinate work between programs and counties; and (3) to be able to share stories with the public and stakeholders about WSU Extension's continued work despite the pandemic.

Data Collection

The survey was fielded over a nine-month timeframe, during which there were 468 responses from 172 WSU faculty and staff. The data was initially used to inform the WSU Extension Administrative Team about the ways in which faculty and staff around the state were responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. As time progressed, the reach of the data was expanded, used also to enlighten stakeholders and leaders within both the larger WSU system and individual counties. Finally, the data was shared with the general public through articles and social media under the direction of a communications team, with the intent to help citizens of the state understand how Extension work was vital and continuous during COVID-19. The survey used open-ended questions, including:

1. Please provide a brief description of any COVID-19 related activities, products, and/or deliverables you have created or implemented.

2. Please provide a brief description of any results that have come about because of your COVID-19 related activities, products, and/or deliverables.

Analysis

Given the wide breadth of data gathered, a variety of analyses were conducted. One in particular focused on the ways WSU Extension's response to the pandemic was aligned with the Policy, Systems, and Environmental Framework. Initially, a deductive qualitative analysis was undertaken using the primary tenets of the PSE Framework – policy, systems, environment – as a priori codes. As is common with qualitative evaluation projects, an inductive analysis was also completed, which allowed for additional findings to emerge from the data (Thomas, 2006). Therefore, after the data was coded into these three primary themes, the data was reviewed again. During this process, in vivo codes were created, which use the respondent's words directly (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). The in vivo codes were sorted into categories and a coding framework was created. Using this framework, the

data was re-coded several more times until no additional in vivo codes or broader categories were identified. The final coding framework contained the following categories:

- *Policy:*
  - Creating policies
  - Developing plans
  - Modifying business practices

- *Systems:*
  - Establishing coalition or task force
  - Establishing processes related to food access and availability
  - Expanding work focus of coalition or task force

- *Environment:*
  - Adding built resource
  - Broadening food access and availability
  - Developing online platforms
  - Expanding broadband access

Findings

The results from this study showed the majority of PSE projects reported on by respondents were looking to address the inequities that exist around the state of Washington in the areas of broadband access and food access, security, and availability. These are not new issues; however, the COVID-19 pandemic escalated their impact. As anticipated, the majority of PSE-focused projects (n=14) were being conducted by faculty and staff within the Community and Economic Development Unit at WSU. The remaining projects (n=8) were led by either Youth and Family or Agricultural and Natural Resources faculty.

Within the area of policy, faculty reported working with cities to help businesses adapt their practices to better meet the needs brought about by COVID-19. Other projects within the policy arena included developing new plans around topics like volunteers, communications, and city response to the pandemic. New policies were also created, including the development of a farmer cooperative and the establishment of unemployment benefits for farmworkers needing to quarantine. One

respondent reported on how a new farmer loan policy was developed:

We have been partnering with a local economic development organization and land trusts to establish an emergency fund for farmers: "pre-contracting" loans to farmers to help their businesses RIGHT NOW that can be paid back through equivalent donations of produce to the food banks over the next 5-10 years…. We are providing guidance and technical assistance to the partners to get the program up and running successfully (WSU Faculty, 2020).

The systems work was concentrated primarily on establishing new processes to increase food access and availability and either establishing a coalition or task force or expanding the focus of their work. One new process resulted in 1,200 pounds of frozen Washington-caught cod being delivered to two counties' food banks, providing healthy, lean protein to patrons located in geographically isolated and rural communities.

Projects working to influence the COVID-19 environment included: (1) developing online platforms related to businesses and food access and availability, such as one directory of "how and where to buy food from local farmers since the farmers markets have been shut down" (WSU Faculty, 2020); (2) conducting broadband mapping and expanding broadband access (Rÿser, et. al, 2020); and (3) adding built resources, such as outdoor dining options, as well as the following:

There are now five "Little Free Pantries" around [the city], and several under construction for [the two counties]. They are like the Little Free Libraries that you see popping up but they hold food. Community members stock them for others in need. We're mobilizing the community across our counties to create the Pantries as an alternative site of equitable food access and radical community trust (WSU Faculty, 2020).

Case Study: A PSE-Focused Approach to Helping Migrant and Seasonal Farmers During COVID-19 in the Columbia Gorge Region

Agriculture plays a significant role in the Columbia Gorge Region, which is known for its apple, pear, and cherry production. Each year, approximately 30,000 to 40,000 migrant and seasonal workers arrive to pick orchard fruit during harvest and then work in fruit packing facilities. This group of workers is critical to the success of the region and its economy. However, the living and working conditions of the seasonal and migrant workers were at odds with COVID-19 restrictions. In response, a group of concerned community members reached out to one another to find ways to support these workers and to prevent similar potential outbreaks that had occurred in other agriculture segments.

Through the help of this small set of community voices, an organization called The Next Door Inc. took the initial lead to create a work group. Expanding to include 70 community partners and 140 total participants, the work group met 147 times during 2020. WSU Extension played a critical role, building on its strong relationships with the orchard industry and other community partners and agencies.

The work group focused its efforts on multiple fronts working proactively when possible and tackling complex issues as they emerged. One of the most effective PSE related tasks accomplished thus far was to ensure the migrant and seasonal farmworkers were moved up on the Washington State COVID-19 Vaccine Phases. Working with the county health departments, hospitals, and members of the Governor's staff, the Farm Bureau, Washington Department of Health, and our local Columbia Gorge Growers Association, the group advocated together for a regional policy change prioritizing vaccines for seasonal and migrant workers. These efforts were successful, and as of March 2021, agricultural workers in Washington were all eligible for the vaccine. This work continues with the coordination of onsite vaccine clinics at orchards and packing plants, as well as the creation of English and Spanish messages to encourage farmworkers to protect themselves and others by getting vaccinated.

The infographic below provides additional details about the types of PSE projects WSU faculty and staff reported working on to address COVID-19.

Limitations

Respondents were not prompted to report about projects that were PSE-related. As such, there are likely additional examples of PSE-focused work that came to fruition during COVID-19. A follow-up survey querying specifically about PSE projects would be useful and would likely gather a broader sample of work.

Conclusion

Exploring the response to this specific crisis, which is time bound, has helped WSU Extension to identify and enhance two critical opportunities. First, uncovering the myriad of ways projects are completed on a PSE level demonstrates how

Extension is contributing to public value. Secondly, this study also visibly shows how WSU Extension is working alongside community partners. As Harder (2019) substantiates, "There is no plausible future scenario in which Extension will be successful without forming partnerships. The needs are too great, the problems too complex, and Extension's resources too few for us to go it alone." Using a PSE Framework creates community-level impacts while addressing complex issues, both within a COVID-19 context as explored here, as well as beyond. Furthermore, it must be noted that collecting this information is not enough. There must also be ways to effectively communicate the PSE-focused work of Extension to audiences both within the University, as well as to outside stakeholders and funders, to ensure the work is recognized as not only vital but also worth the time and effort. ●
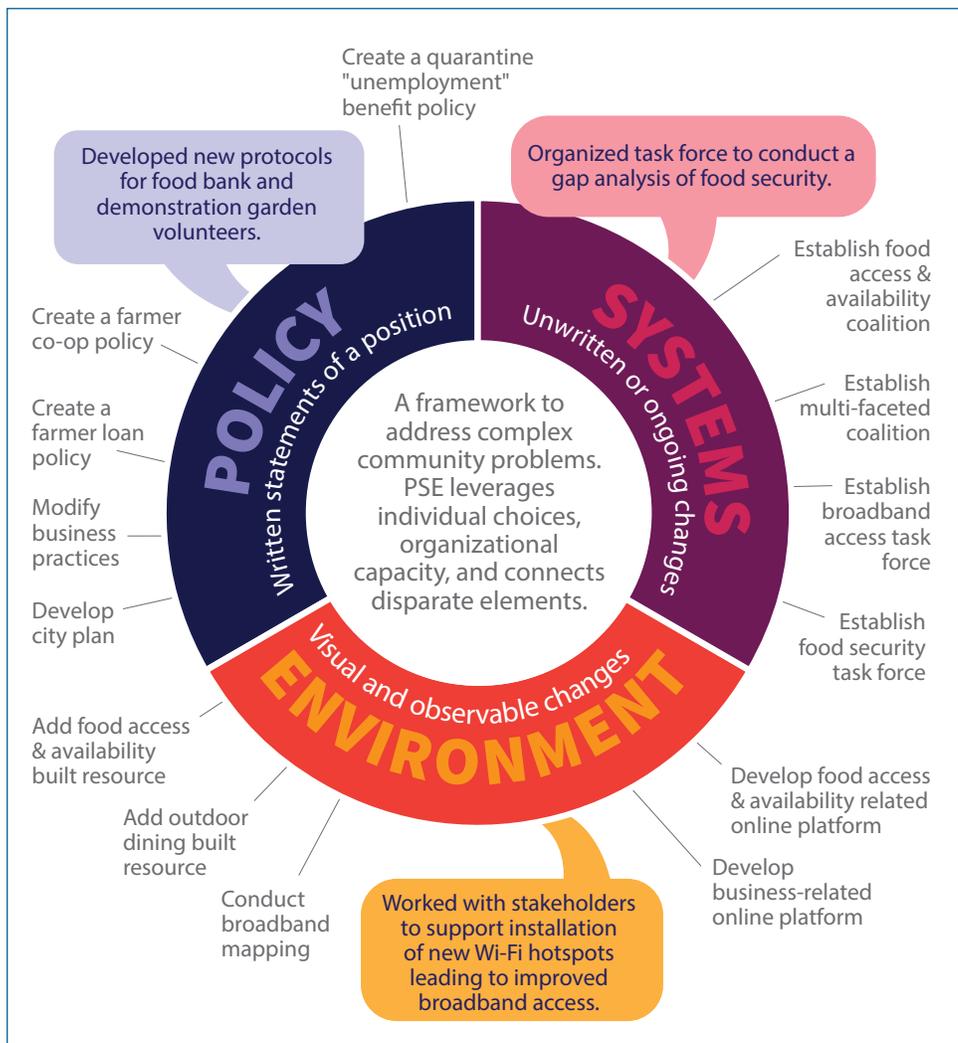
"Esencial" Training Poster

To help combat the fear and racist language and behavior being directed towards the Gorge's migrant workers, the work group rallied to show support and solidarity. Artist Edith Belman, who is the daughter of farmworkers, created images that were used to promote positive messages such as "We are one Community" and "Thank a farmworker today." In total, 33 large banners, 60 posters, and 100 yard signs were featured around the Gorge, working to improve the systems and environment of the Gorge farmworkers. This artwork was also used on "Esencial" Training Posters, flyers, and other material to share educational video links about COVID-19.

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