

IMPACT

University of Idaho
Extension

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County at a Glance Project Impacts Decision Making Process

The Situation

The decisions Idaho's leaders and citizens make today affect generations to come. Many Idaho counties face changes that influence all aspects of government and community. Issues leaders and stakeholders struggle with include unexpected growth and demands for infrastructure upgrades and expansion, changing demographics and conflicts around these changes, social issues including crime, and parks and recreation expectations for growing and diverse communities. Leaders may have difficulty explaining the need for expanded government services to citizens who feel threatened by a change in lifestyle that often accompanies growth. Decision makers and stakeholders are often faced with hearsay and data from non-credible sources.

To make informed decisions it is important that Idaho leaders and citizens can understand and retrieve data quickly and efficiently. University of Idaho Extension is uniquely situated to be the leader in providing credible, accessible data to its stakeholders. In addition, educators can explain the implications of data and provide stakeholders with the tools they need to make decisions that will help communities not only survive, but also prosper during times of rapid change.

Our Response

The Data Tools for Understanding Communities Focus Committee, a part of the Community Development Topic Team, developed tools to help

communities understand the economic, social, and demographic circumstances of their county in relationship to other counties and to the state. The Data Tools project began with brochures from Teton, Boundary and Bonner Counties. These brochures, called *County at a Glance*, contained information from the Northwest Area Foundation website. This website, maintained by University of Idaho research associates and analysts, contains information from well-respected sources. The data, tracked over time, creates a picture of every Idaho County in relation to the state and to the nation. The initial brochures received a warm reception from county commissioners and citizens who found the data useful in understanding the county's needs and in making decisions about the county's future.

With grant funding, UI research analysts and associates expanded the usefulness and reach of the brochures by developing a CD and binder that included a brochure and PowerPoint presentation. The binder also contained instructions that explained ways to customize the brochure and PowerPoint to fit county and audience needs. The material also helped educators interpret the data in relation to the audience and showed educators how to tell the story behind the statistics. The Data Tools team distributed the packet to educators and District Directors at the UI Extension Annual Conference in Idaho Falls in April 2006 and provided information on how to use the CD and binder.

Program Outcomes

Since the inception of the statewide program in 2006, Extension Educators have printed 3,437 brochures and distributed them to chambers of commerce, economic development groups, county employees, hospital employees, school district staff and teachers, and at county and state fairs. Brochures are also available in county extension offices. Chambers of commerce and economic development groups include brochures in relocation and recruitment packages. District Directors use brochures as context and/or situation statements. Educators display posters developed from the brochure in courthouses and at fairs. *County at a Glance* brochures are updated periodically and posted to county web pages.

Educators across the state have presented the PowerPoint presentation to a variety of organizations. At this point, 577 individuals have viewed the presentation. Evaluation data reveals that:

- 95% of participants increased their knowledge of facts about their county.
- 100% of participants feel more competent in their ability to use and interpret statistical information and know how to locate data.
- In reference to the *County at a Glance* brochure, a county commissioner said, “Too often we make decisions based on what is politically expedient. This publication provides easily accessible and reliable data that makes decision making more systematic.”

As an unanticipated outcome of the project, stakeholders see Extension Educators as resources when they need reliable data. Stakeholders seek out Extension Educators when they need data for grants, school levies, newspaper and magazine articles, and strategic plans. In addition, educators in other states have called UI Extension for information on how to develop the materials for use in their counties.

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