

## IMPACT WRITING

Increasingly, the preparation of meaningful impact statements is becoming a priority matter for administrators, faculty and staff. We all need to spend more time on this activity.

Why is the preparation of impact statements so important? Perhaps the most important reason that we need to prepare well-focused and articulate impact statements is our need to justify and even defend the investments that are made to our system by Congress for public sector research and extension activities. And good impact statements can also be useful in presenting our “case” for funding to state and county government, to foundations and other (non-federal) funding sources, and even to our own institutional leadership. Good impact reporting illustrates the accountability of the organization or program, it improves program visibility, generates materials for the lobbying effort, is a repository of anecdotes for speeches, talks, and other outreach efforts, helps the organization focus its efforts, and creates better understanding of programs with the public.

Bottom line, it is easier to sell science and education programs when there is an emphasis on outcomes/impacts. And, while some of the discussion below focuses on research impacts, effective impact statements are also required for extension activity and the same framework for constructing these statements applies to both research and extension.

So how do you prepare an effective impact statement? What is an effective impact statement?

In many ways, the impact statement is the culmination of a successful program, the proof of a responsive effort in research or extension. The impact statement is really nothing more than an accountability statement. You just need to identify the impact, and then know how to use it effectively, or at least prepare the impact statement in a manner that others can use effectively. Effective impact statements can be used by the University’s state and federal lobbyists in representing our interests in Trenton and on Capitol Hill, and by USDA-NIFA to document the importance of maintaining financial support for agricultural experiment stations and extension services.

The clearly written impact statement presents the results of the research or extension effort to the targeted audience. In one short paragraph you need to explain the problem or issue you’re trying to solve and its importance. Here is where you can benchmark the problem and even establish cost-benefits for the stakeholder. It is the “*Who Cares, So What and What’s New?*” question. If you can answer this question, you can write an effective impact statement.

The effective impact statement not only answers the “*Who Cares, So What and What’s New?*” question, it is a brief summary in lay terms, written to demonstrate, in an economic, environmental or social context, the impact of your effort(s), the

accomplishments and the payoff to stakeholders. Another way of stating this is – *“Impact is the difference that your program(s) are making in people’s lives and well-being”*. In more technical terms, impact is the reportable and verifiable difference that a program makes in the lives of citizens. Just remember, impact reporting is not activity reporting. And items such as the number of publications, number of seminars or presentations, number of people who attended grower meetings, etc. are outputs, not impacts.

In your impact paragraph can you explain the problem or issue and its importance? Ask yourself: What prompted this work? How important is this issue to the region, or nation? How widespread is this problem and who is affected?

Once you have defined the problem, then you set the stage and tell the reader why this information is important. Frame the scope of the problem or issue. Mention the potential public payoffs that have or are resulting from this work. In fact, in REEport terms, if you have written up your project initiation forms properly (particularly in the Non-Technical Summary section), you should be able to copy and paste text from these forms to start your impact statement. Or, to put this another way, the construction of a good impact statement starts with the information that you provide in your project initiation forms.

Then describe what you did to solve the problem or address the issue. Provide in the briefest possible way, the details of the project that are meaningful to the non-scientist reading this statement. Then describe *“What has been done?”*

The impact paragraph is the heart of the statement that you are preparing. Here is where you quantify what you accomplished in economic, environmental or social terms. How do your findings relate to real people and real-world programs. This is where you reinforce the *“So What, Who Cares and What’s New?”* question. If the research or extension activity has already completed and/or resulted in measurable outcomes, quantify the impact. How much of an increase in crop yields, reduction in pesticide expenses, reduced incidence of food contamination, for example, occurred or are estimated to occur as the result of your work?

When entering your annual or final project reports in REEport, this impact paragraph should “front” your accomplishments section, i.e. where you answer the question “What was accomplished under these (your project) goals?” The impact paragraph, constructed as described above, includes a very brief description of what you did during the reporting period and the outcomes (if any), again in lay terms. This will make it very easy for USDA-NIFA staff to identify important impacts associated with specific types of research activity and to pull targeted impact statements to document the relevance of their funding. Then, after your impact statement, you can go into more detail about your activities and accomplishments.

Now, if you have just started a new research project, clearly you can't say much about actual impacts of your research findings. So, a description of the potential impacts of your research is very important. Likewise, those of you whose research is more laboratory-based rather than applied in nature may only be able to speak to the potential for your research to improve some aspect of public welfare. But it is very important that you do this and identify, as specifically as possible, the types of impacts that could materialize and the stakeholders/sectors of the economy or society that will benefit. Economic, environmental, and social/individual impacts all count here. And certainly research that leads to improvements in laboratory-based research methods counts as an impact, particularly if you can identify the ultimate improvement in public welfare that will result from this new, improved methodology.

What happens to the information that you provide in your REEport project reports? First, it is made publicly available, via the USDA-NIFA's public access data base (CRIS). Anyone can search for projects (by project director name, keyword, state, knowledge area, subject of investigation, etc.). Also, USDA-NIFA staff will comb through this data base to fill information requests from their boss, from congressional staffers, and others. Your audience will include a wide range of stakeholders and interests. But they are NOT, by and large, scientists. Some of them are very busy and some may have short attention spans, due to the many competing demands for their time and attention. They are bombarded with a lot of information (and, in some instances, no small amount of misinformation, as well). So, effective impact statements must be structured and worded to communicate the essentials of your research, its importance and significance, and its impact. Again, the stress is on the use of lay language, with no scientific jargon. Stylistically, you should use active voice (rather than passive voice) in your impact statements.

And, by the way, it is not a bad idea to take any impact statement that you put together for reporting purposes, particularly those projects with significant and quantifiable impacts, and add some additional information for your own marketing purposes. You can add your name, address, phone and/or e-mail contacts. For some purpose, it's also important to list funding sources. Don't forget those who contributed or played a role in making your effort successful. Then keep this on file for future use.

Note: this document was adapted from an impact writing statement directed at multistate administrative advisors and AES directors written by the NorthEast Region Association.