



Identify SMART Indicators

When the goal or intended outcome of your program is immediate, short-term, or medium-term, you can often measure your success directly. Long-term outcomes, on the other hand, are often difficult to measure and are subject to a greater influence from external factors that are out of your control. For this reason, we have the concept of ‘indicators’ of success. An ‘indicator’ is a quantitative measurement that provides some degree of evidence that you are achieving your goal. It is what people would “see, hear, feel, or do” if your goal was being reached (George Washington University’s Strategic Management & Performance Systems Certificate Program, 2019).

The development of your program via a logic model or theory of change should lead naturally to a pool of potential indicators you can use to gauge your success. A slight modification to SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-Bound) criteria can help you develop meaningful indicators related to your program:

- Specific – narrow enough to represent your specific program
- Measurable – data can be collected in a reliable way with a reasonable amount of effort
- Attainable – the indicator captures something achievable by you or your team
- Relevant – they reflect your scope of work
- Timely – indicators are representative of current events and important issues

(Switching *Time-Bound* to *Timely* reflects the fact that CSUE does not currently employ time-bound target-setting for most of our program efforts, yet it is important that our work aligns with current events.) Let’s consider these SMART criteria when looking at potential indicators related to a goal that **“households implement sustainable energy best practices”**.

Potential Indicator	Specific	Measurable	Attainable	Relevant	Timely
Number of households that have implemented sustainable energy best practices (m-t outcome)	?	x	x	x	x
Number of households with increased knowledge of costs and benefits of sustainable energy measures (s-t outcome)	x	x	x	x	x
Number of solar assessments conducted (output)	x	x	x	x	x
Number of utility rebate applications facilitated (output)	x	?	x	x	x
Number of sustainable energy workshops provided (output)	x	x	x	x	x
Number of hits to sustainable energy website (output)	x	x	x	x	x

Most of these potential indicators meet the SMART criteria. The “Number of households that have implemented sustainable energy best practices” is the **actual goal** trying to be achieved. It can also serve as an “indicator” if it can be directly measured, as will likely be the case with immediate, short-term, and some medium-term outcomes. This particular indicator may be questionable, however, because it does not identify what qualifies as a “sustainable energy best practice”. The team can instead use something like “cost-effective solar energy” in place of “sustainable energy best practices” if solar is a focus of the team’s efforts.

An individual or program team may choose to track some or all of these sample indicators. However, in order to maintain focus on achieving your goal or intended outcome, it is suggested that you choose no more than three of them as **key indicators**. A **key indicator** is one that communicates the most significant results of your work to key stakeholders/funders. (Key indicators by themselves do not usually tell a complete story of your impact, but they can help round out a story in combination with strong qualitative evidence.)

Because the purpose of a key indicator is to communicate significant results to key stakeholders, it is critical to think about what is relevant to County Commissioners, legislators, and others who provide funding to Extension. Most of these stakeholders are interested in medium-term/applied value (i.e. changes in behavior, practices, and decision-making) and long-term/realized value (i.e. changes in social, economic, and environmental conditions). Realistically, they also may be interested in more traditional measures of outputs. When considering use of an output as a key indicator, the following guidelines can be helpful:

- ***Is the output unique to Extension?***
- ***Could it have special significance or meaning to key stakeholders?*** (This is where, as part of your diverse network, you might ask Commissioners what they want to know about your Extension programming.)
- ***Does it pass the “do you believe me test”?***

The “**Do You Believe Me?**” test is a question you can ask yourself before finalizing indicators/key indicators. To take the test, simply complete the sentence: “Do you believe that [**insert goal/outcome**] because [**insert indicator**]” (Chemonics, 2018). For example, would you believe that [households adopted sustainable energy best practices] because [Extension facilitated 30 utility rebate applications]? Maybe; maybe not. This sole output is likely not sufficient to convince stakeholders that Extension achieved its goal. But would you believe that [households adopted sustainable energy best practices] because [Extension facilitated 30 utility rebate applications] **and** because [30 households installed cost-effective solar energy]? That is hard to argue with.

Even if you can’t measure your intended outcome directly, using a theory of change to ensure that outputs or short-term outcomes are evidence of medium- or long-term outcomes can help you pass the “do you believe me” test. For PRUs, only **key indicator** data would be collected in Digital Measures so as to limit the statewide reporting burden and so that Extension’s collective story can remain more focused and digestible. (Other indicator data can be collected internally by PRUs.)