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## Developing and Supporting the Future Extension Professional

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## Developing and Supporting the Future Extension Professional

### Abstract

Continual disruption and change describe the new normal. Embedded in complex systems and cultures, Extension professionals are at the heart of this change for many of today's issues. Relying on the traditional models for developing Extension professionals will not be enough for Extension to make a significant impact in the future. We present a model of education and training to develop and support Extension professionals as they work with individuals, organizations, and communities in the 21st century.

**Keywords:** [professional development](#), [preparation of Extension professionals](#), [future of Extension work](#), [competencies](#)

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## Introduction

Imagine a world unlike anything you know. One where Extension is not a valued source of scientific information. Where Extension must operate beyond its traditional boundaries of programs and funding. Where there is no county fair. Where there is no physical Extension office. Where Alexa and Siri are the first places people turn for knowledge. Where Extension is forced to adopt new ways of operating. These are not only things worth imagining; these are real possibilities and, in some cases, are already realities in places throughout the United States (Calvin, 2018; Collins & Gaolach, 2018; Extension Committee on Organization

The impacts of accelerated change are all around us. Adoption of innovative tools and technologies is skyrocketing (McGrath, 2013). Where it took 50 years for the telephone to reach 50 million users (Desjardins, 2018), it took only 19 days for Pokémon to do the same (Lim, 2016). In our world, we are more *interconnected* than ever before (Pew Research Center, 2014) and yet increasingly divided (Gramlich, 2016). We are more *educated* than ever before and yet need more knowledge or information, and often expect to find it at our fingertips (Jobs for the Future, 2013).

There is no question that we are in times where disruption and change are the norm. This constant shifting affects our role as Extension professionals. It affects the strength of our ties with long-standing stakeholders and opens doors to potential new partnerships. To effectively carry out our mission in this ever-changing landscape, it is imperative that Extension leaders rethink the strategic approach to developing and supporting the organization's professionals (Henning, Buchholz, Steele, & Ramaswamy, 2014).

## Background

Historically, possession of a graduate degree was required for many Extension professionals. Graduate majors focused primarily on Extension education, resulting in curricula heavy in program development and teaching pedagogy. Over time, the graduate majors of potential Extension personnel expanded to include a variety of agriculture, community, family, and health disciplines. To meet the needs of these individuals with non-Extension-education graduate degrees, Extension assumed the responsibility for training in the foundations of program development and teaching pedagogy. The diversity of technical expertise, educational backgrounds, and unique issues of local focus have challenged Extension leaders charged with developing comprehensive training and professional development programs for Extension professionals ever since.

A great deal of work has been done to assess competencies deemed essential for successful Extension work (Cummings, Andrews, Weber, & Postert, 2015; Harder, Place, & Scheer, 2010; Lakai, Jayaratne, Moore, & Kistler, 2014; Narine, Bengel, Harder, & Albert, 2018; Scheer, Cochran, Harder, & Place, 2011; Scheer, Ferrari, Earnest, & Connors, 2006; Seger & Hill, 2016). Table 1 lists those competencies.

**Table 1.**

Synthesis of Extension Professional Core Competencies Identified in Publications

Competency	Year referenced in published documents						
	2006	2009	2010	2011	2013	2014	2017
Leadership and management	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Extension knowledge	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Program development and evaluation	X	X		X	X	X	X
Research skills	X	X	X	X	X		X
Communication and marketing	X	X			X	X	X
Technology	X	X			X		
Diversity appreciation and knowledge	X	X			X		X

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Interpersonal skills		X	X		X	X	X
Community development knowledge	X	X			X		X
Subject matter expertise		X	X		X	X	
Professionalism		X		X		X	
Business sense/funding/grants			X		X		X
Key personality attributes		X			X	X	
Networking				X	X		X
Ability to conduct needs assessments					X		X
Life span development and knowledge	X						

## **Challenge to Reinvent the Development of Future Extension Professionals**

Program development and evaluation will always hold a place in Extension work, but it may no longer be the foundation for how Extension work is done. Recent efforts we undertook support the notion that the context of Extension work in the future requires a different approach and, therefore, requires Extension professionals to think differently about the key competencies needed for professional and programmatic success.

For Extension's centennial, Ohio State University Extension (OSUE) engaged in a strategic foresight project to envision a dynamic Extension organization for the next century. We used trend research to develop scenarios of possible futures for Ohio, engaged in broad conversations to discover what residents will need to thrive in 2035, and brainstormed ways OSUE could address those needs (The Ohio State University College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences [OSU CFAES], 2015).

Through this project, we confirmed that people want to use technology to gain knowledge and information but also value in-person connection and guidance from trusted sources (OSU CFAES, 2015). We confirmed that the issues individuals and communities are facing are becoming increasingly more complex, requiring more sophisticated solutions. And we confirmed that Extension is ideally suited to bring people and organizations together to address such complex issues with customized solutions, unique to the needs of those directly affected.

As we looked to make changes in the present to become better prepared for the future, we learned that a few challenging, even nagging, questions remained. For example, should Extension professionals specialize or generalize? What does "local" even mean anymore? And how does the organization best support the well-being and development of Extension professionals facing the wicked problems that exist today?

## **Discussion**

Historically, skills in program development and evaluation, research expertise, and a fundamental knowledge of Extension served as the cornerstones of Extension work. Succeeding as Extension professionals in the 21st century requires skills and abilities beyond those on which Extension was formed.

Twenty-first-century challenges are embedded within complex systems in which no single event is the cause of a challenge and no single program can be the solution. Extension personnel must work within a network of agencies and organizations that are already addressing some of the many factors contributing to complicated challenges. To work in this way requires competence in high-efficiency teamwork, connecting (systems thinking), convening, adaptability, problem solving, leading change, communication, relationship building, entrepreneurship, and confronting risk.

Our challenge is to cultivate these abilities within an Extension organization very different from the one we have come to know. On the basis of our strategic foresight findings, we can paint a picture of the Extension organization of the future. Imagine it as flexible, prepared to meet challenges, and capable of foreseeing opportunities before they arrive. Imagine an Extension structure comprised of small working groups, or "strategic action teams," of four or five people possessing complementary skill sets that enable them to address issues from multiple perspectives. Now, imagine these teams working at the highest level of efficiency and effectiveness. Team members are in possession of the skills and abilities needed to collaborate with technical experts and leaders across various organizations and communities in ways that begin to chip away at some of our most wicked problems (e.g., addiction, poverty, violence, discrimination).

Imagine the strategic action teams working in partnership to frame issues locally, identify components of an action plan, and marshal the associated relevant resources. The teams and their collaborators cocreate, coach, and consult to build the capacity of individuals, organizations, and communities to advance positive change.

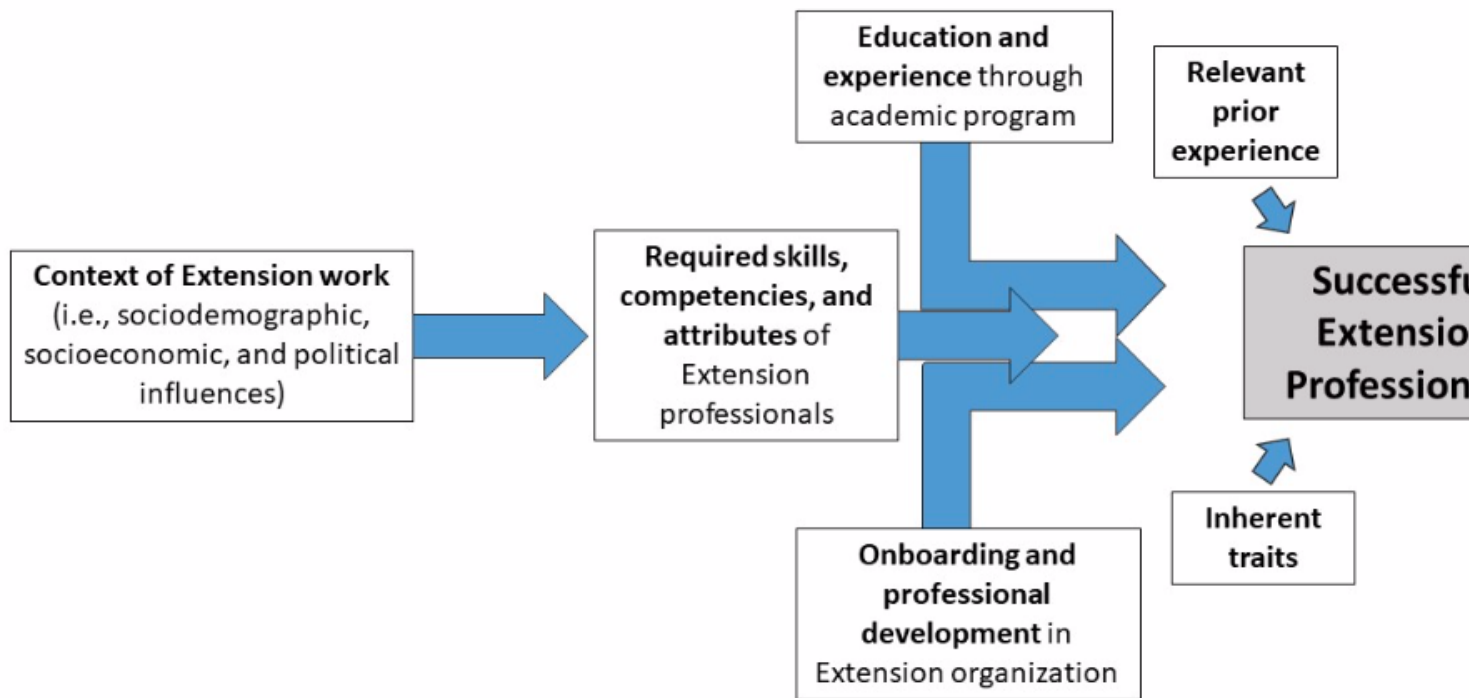
The concept of strategic action teams is a futuristic model for Extension work, and as suggested by our strategic foresight findings, it is a model the system is moving toward. This is a gradual evolution, and, in some cases, we in Extension are having trouble letting go of what we know to be . . . comfortable. If the direction we are headed is a place in need of social entrepreneurs, Extension surely has a role to play. But how do we equip ourselves to succeed in this endeavor?

To support a workforce capable of operating in strategic action teams would require Extension as an organization to think differently about how Extension professionals are prepared. There would exist the need to reach beyond the original program development, evaluation, and delivery competency framework into a more expansive model of systems leadership and social entrepreneurship. Building on our efforts to identify widely used competencies in Extension and the strategic foresight work we conducted to envision Extension's future, we suggest that it is time to reevaluate and prioritize competencies that may be more applicable to the context of a highly engaged and collaborative type of work (OSU CFAES, 2015).

## **A Model for Preparing Extension Professionals**

Extension professional competencies should be aligned with and operationalized to reflect the future of Extension work. To achieve the greatest impact, we must understand the reality of the environment in which Extension professionals work. A common understanding among all partners involved in the process of developing Extension professionals is critical. Figure 1 illustrates the components required for preparing the contemporary Extension professional and thus serves as a new model for the employee preparation and development process.

**Figure 1.**



This new approach to developing Extension professionals will require a collaborative effort and fresh perspectives. Fold in forward-focused academic preparation via degree and Extension professional development programs, and you have the key components of a future-oriented approach to professional development in Extension. This model anticipates future needs of clientele and puts forth an innovative, collaborative approach to preparing Extension professionals for success.

### Conclusions

It is time to remove our blinders to the future, to be visionary in forecasting new ways of working, and to be open to seeing necessary competencies from a new perspective. It is time to challenge our paradigms, to assess how to create greater impact, and to start preparing Extension professionals for it. It is time to foster an entrepreneurial mind-set among Extension personnel so that we might capitalize on connections and opportunities that otherwise will go unseen. It is time to engage others in conversations about how best to develop and support Extension professionals for the organization's future. We are stronger together. Often our time is spent looking at things that have been and asking *why?* Instead, let us now dream of things that have yet to be and ask *why not?*

### Author Notes

Karen J. Argabright is currently a postdoctoral associate in the Office of Learning and Organizational Development at the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia. Mariah K. Stollar is currently a graduate associate in the Department of Agricultural Economics, Sociology, and Education at The Pennsylvania State University in University Park, Pennsylvania.

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