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Increasing Global Thinking and Engagement Within Extension

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Increasing Global Thinking and Engagement Within Extension

Abstract

The increasingly prominent trend of globalization now affects all U.S. communities. Extension, in its mission to help these communities, must increase its global thinking and engagement so that communities can adapt to this modern trend and continue to thrive. In this commentary, I discuss the reasons why increased global thinking and responsive action is necessary as well as beneficial for the communities Extension serves. Further, I give examples of various ways Extension personnel can increase their global engagement and identify potential collaborators for such endeavors.

Keywords: [globalization](#), [international engagement](#), [global thinking](#), [leadership development](#), [international economic development](#)

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Introduction: The Need for a Global Mind-Set

The trend of globalization—which entails the integration of local and national economies into a single worldwide one—has been steadily increasing for the last couple of decades. Consequently, it is now a reality that U.S. workers must compete not only with other U.S. workers but also with skilled workers from around the world. In addition to this competition, workers must be prepared to work with international partners and collaborators as product supply chains are increasingly multinational. This global interconnectivity will only increase as technology continues to lower barriers to global interaction (Friedman, 2005). As a result, all communities served by Extension will face increasing interactions with international entities.

Additionally, modern leadership requires global competencies, even for those within small and regional organizations. Many have identified skills such as cultural intelligence and tolerance for ambiguity as important for successful leadership, and these skills can no longer be overlooked by leadership training programs (Alon & Higgins, 2005; Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012). Extension plays a prominent role in leadership development for youths and adults in many communities throughout the United States, as evidenced in several published articles (e.g., Chen, King, Cochran, & Argabright, 2014; Smith, Genry, & Ketring, 2005;

Tackie, Findlay, Baharanyi, & Pierce, 2004). It only makes sense for Extension to incorporate global perspectives into the leadership development programming it currently delivers.

As we in Extension consider how to maintain the organization's relevance in modern times, one necessary action for meeting this challenge is increasing our global thinking and engagement. Global engagement can take many forms—diverse potential embodiments of and partners for this endeavor exist. Further, increased global engagement will create direct benefits for the communities in which it is implemented. Therefore, global engagement should be considered a priority for all Extension personnel who envision growth opportunities. I believe Extension is uniquely suited to provide the resources needed for global partnerships.

Diverse Opportunities for Global Engagement Within Extension

There is no single method that those within Extension must use to increase their global engagement. Instead, diverse options exist for working toward this goal. Further, this action does not require international travel (a misconception that discourages many from considering global engagement). Rather, there are multiple ways one can pursue global engagement from within the United States. In other words, Extension professionals may consider various embodiments of global engagement and pursue the paths of action that best fit their skill sets and the responsibilities of their Extension appointments.

One of the simplest ways for Extension professionals to increase global engagement is to augment programming currently being delivered to include material focused on global topics. For example, Extension leadership development programs for both adults and youths could be made more beneficial through attention to global competencies necessary for successful leadership. Entrepreneurship programming delivered by Extension, such as that introduced by Zimbroff, Schlake, Anderson-Knott, Eberle, and Vigna (2017), could be enhanced through incorporation of topics such as global business trends and strategies entrepreneurs can use to reach worldwide markets. Longer term efforts could even include creating new curricula or interventions aimed solely at developing global competencies.

Further, many people come to the United States from other countries for education and training, a trend especially concentrated around universities. This training frequently entails informal learning (i.e., education delivered outside a formal classroom setting). Extension professionals, with their vast experience delivering informal programming, can effectively contribute to this training, thereby sharing their expertise with an international audience. One example of such opportunities is the Mandela Washington Fellowship (MWF), a program that brings hundreds of young African leaders to U.S. universities every year for 6 weeks of leadership training. Many of the fellows in the program pursue careers in agriculture and civic leadership (YALI Network, n.d.). Many in Extension have considerable experience delivering programming focused on both of these topics and could make an impactful contribution to the MWF program and others like it.

Finally, Extension professionals can increase global engagement by participating in educational programming in international settings. Such programming provides an opportunity for sharing best practices and insights from the United States with those in other countries, where training and education systems might not be as advanced. For example, the Agricultural Capacity Development program of the U.S. Agency for International Development is focused on providing technical assistance to farmers in developing nations. This program brings U.S. agricultural experts to developing countries to train farmers, with the goal of increasing agricultural output and farm incomes. Many Extension specialists and educators have the exact expertise needed to run such programming and could make an impactful contribution to training abroad (U.S. Agency

for International Development, 2018). It is important to note that many of these programs are less than 3 weeks in length, meaning that Extension personnel can participate without significant disruption of their responsibilities in the United States.

How Global Engagement Directly Benefits the Communities We Serve

When discussing this topic, I have heard some argue that international engagement is outside the scope of Extension. Further, they claim that although there are diplomatic benefits to engaging international audiences, doing so does not directly benefit the communities Extension serves. I respond to these arguments by discussing the multiple ways I have seen international engagement and leadership create tangible benefits for U.S. communities. My observations, some examples of which I describe herein, make me confident that such work helps fulfill our land-grant mission and benefits the communities in which Extension operates.

Many within Extension work to create economic development and new opportunities for the communities in which they reside. Global engagement creates opportunities for economic growth through new markets and business partners. It is not especially challenging to create these new opportunities as they fit with the modern trends of international supply chains and commerce. As an example, I mentor a student from Colombia who wants to start a business importing soybeans to his home country. Through his own past research, he has identified many within the country who would buy U.S. soybeans if they were available domestically. Personnel in Nebraska Extension are showing this student how to identify and work with suppliers and transportation partners in the United States. If successful, he will create a new market for soybeans, benefiting local farmers.

Additionally, global engagement can lead to the discovery of innovations and new ideas around the world. These ideas can be adapted and implemented within the communities we serve, leading to opportunities for innovation and improvement. For example, a recent report identified 338 agribusiness-focused start-ups in Brazil, many of which are intended to help producers of important crops in the United States, such as corn, soybeans, and cattle (Jardim, 2018). Collaboration with start-ups such as these can help producers in the United States improve output and better compete with Brazilian farmers who are using these same innovations.

Additional Opportunities for Extension to Engage Globally

Initiating global engagement does not have to be a new or completely independent action. There are many existing programs Extension can leverage for successful global engagement. In addition to the examples mentioned previously, other academic entities may be considered as potential partners:

- *International universities with extension or other outreach programs.* Universities abroad (e.g., Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza in Costa Rica) often have a charge to help serve the communities in which they are located (Brenes, n.d.). These universities are frequently open to new collaborations and often have missions similar to those of U.S. Extension programs.
- *University global engagement offices.* Many universities, including land-grant institutions, have offices dedicated to increasing their global footprint. Their endeavors can serve as a springboard for Extension

Conclusion

Although increasing global engagement is not always considered within Extension, the organization is well suited to address this currently growing challenge. Extension has a large pool of human capital with skills that are ideal for diverse forms of global engagement. Further, the greater Extension network, and other infrastructure, make finding collaborators and creating these new initiatives relatively straightforward. As a result, increasing global engagement should not cause apprehension or uncertainty for those within Extension. Extension has great capacity to address this challenge, and thus increase its modern relevance for the communities and constituents the organization serves.

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