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Leveraging Cooperative Extension's Competitive Advantages for Success in 2019 and Beyond

Abstract

Many academic institutions of higher education are experiencing fluctuating or declining levels of public support and funding. One approach to framing potential solutions is identifying the competitive advantages academic institutions have in the marketplace. The advantages for Extension can be described in the context of increasing effectiveness, efficiency, and long-term impact. As an organization, we can focus on 10 competitive advantages related to brand, product, impact, leveraged resources, relevance, objectivity, approach, networks, trust, and unique expertise. The future success of Extension will require that we capitalize on these competitive advantages in visionary and innovative ways to maintain our niche in the marketplace.

Keywords: [competitive advantage](#), [Wisconsin Idea](#), [vision](#), [public value](#), [innovation](#)

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Introduction

University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension (UWCE) has a long history, beginning in 1912. Since that time, Extension in Wisconsin and across the United States has evolved into a network of local agents, specialists, and educators connected to the land-grant institutions in their respective states. Fluctuations in federal, state, and local funding levels have challenged the ability of state Extension programs to function effectively (Chesney, 2005). To address the impact of fluctuations in funding, we at UWCE undertook an intensive 2-year process to restructure and reassess the role of UWCE and determine how to function successfully at local, state, regional, and national scales with the goal of implementing changes in 2018.

A key component of the restructure was to take a business approach to the work of Extension and identify the key competitive advantages Extension programs have in the marketplace across the United States. The next step was to determine how to leverage these advantages and innovate them for future success. There have been several publications on Extension's strengths and public value (e.g., Franz, 2011; Johnson, 1995; Kalambokidis, 2004). However, consideration of Extension's competitive advantages goes further by

highlighting what distinguishes Extension with regard to what it does better than its competitors. Extension's success over the past 100-plus years suggests that these competitive factors correlate well with the internal and external forces that have driven our programming and will continue to do so in the future (Meyer, Meyer, & Katras, 2018).

Increased scrutiny of public funding for institutions of higher education requires a new way of articulating our value proposition. Focusing on competitive advantages meets that need. Competitive advantages provide a context for addressing the myriad of factors affecting Extension and provide a framework for Extension to remain relevant, vibrant, and vital (La Valley et al., 2018).

Cooperative Extension's Competitive Advantages

A competitive advantage is a condition that allows an organization to produce a good or service for its customers and end users more efficiently, more effectively, or at a higher level of quality than other entities in the same market. Quite simply, a competitive advantage allows an organization to generate more value and impact than its competitors do. Competitive advantages can come from a variety of factors, including cost structure, brand, product quality, distribution network, intellectual property, and customer support. Competitive advantages articulate how an organization is more effective or more efficient than its competitors are.

Effectiveness and efficiency are two distinct qualities. Being more effective means having greater impact. Better satisfying customer needs while being efficient involves improving processes to reduce waste in time and resources. Efficiencies place a focus on our customers: How can we improve every internal process to better serve our customers? For example, we can realize efficiencies by using technology to connect with individuals across a state or region to achieve faster, more personalized interaction while reducing barriers that result from travel time and associated expenses. However, to be effective and have a greater impact, we likely will need to use this approach in conjunction with, not as a complete replacement for, in-person interactions. An organization's competitive advantages revolve around its ability to continuously assess and implement the appropriate balance between effectiveness and efficiency in relation to its customers' needs.

At UWCE we formed an integration work group made up of 13 thought leaders from throughout the organization to integrate numerous internal and external reports into a final restructuring plan. To identify a future vision for UWCE, the integration work group identified 10 attributes as competitive advantages that allow Extension to facilitate positive impacts for its audiences more effectively and efficiently than other organizations do. Understanding Extension's competitive advantages is critical to establishing a strategic vision for state Extension organizations and developing approaches for innovation. Innovation provides businesses and organizations the competitive advantage they need to respond to changes in the marketplace (Gaolach, Aitken, & Gromko, 2018). The attributes, strategic vision components, and innovations we identified are applicable across the organization.

The 10 attributes identified by the UWCE integration work group along with associated strategic vision components and planned innovations are described in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Competitive Advantages of Cooperative Extension and Associated Strategic Vision Components and Innovations

Brand Identity

Extension leverages the value of its brands (e.g., Extension, 4-H, Master Gardener, Master Naturalist) to promote its programming and services because the brands are valued and viewed as credible by constituents. One example is the engagement of over 25,000 volunteers who contribute their time to work with various Extension brands in Wisconsin.

| <i>Vision</i> | <i>Innovation</i> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>a. Continue to use existing brands, but also develop new brands using a strategic market analysis approach.</p> <p>b. Consistently brand major programming done by Extension, and be intentional about protecting the use and reputation of Extension brands.</p> | <p>Contract with a marketing firm to increase brand recognition by 20% by 2025 and assess new branding opportunities.</p> |

Connection to World-Class Academic Institutions

Connecting to and leveraging the knowledge, objective research, and resources of the land-grant university system and other academic institutions enables Extension to develop high-quality, evidence-based programming. Extension plays an important role for land-grant universities, serving as either the lead or colead for outreach and engagement activities tied to the mission of these institutions, epitomizing the "Wisconsin Idea" (Hoeveler, 1976).

| <i>Vision</i> | <i>Innovation</i> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>a. Maintain connections to leading-edge research and scholarship through an evidence-based research foundation connected to programming.</p> <p>b. Use the resources of both the in-state academic institutions and the national network of higher education entities, including Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, Joint Council of Extension Professionals, National Urban Extension Leaders, and so on.</p> <p>c. Capitalize on facets of the information age to create a national network of information exchange.</p> | <p>Reach out to and build relationships with out-of-state academic institutions and nontraditional internal academic partners to address priority issues they excel in. Engage with and support the development of regional centers, institutes, and research partnerships to address regional and national issues.</p> |

Focus on Impact

Extension focuses on applying research and educational programming to produce impacts that benefit communities and people.

| <i>Vision</i> | <i>Innovation</i> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>a. Focus on work having local, statewide, regional, and national impacts.</p> <p>b. Systematically document and market impacts that demonstrate the value to constituents, communities served, and decision makers.</p> | <p>Develop a state, regional, and national customer management system, and leverage that system for political support of the Extension mission.</p> |

Leveraged Resources

Extension delivers programs efficiently and at a relatively low cost because it leverages resources including staff, volunteers, facilities, funds, knowledge, and expertise from partners including county governments, tribal communities, other academic institutions, state government agencies, and external funders.

Vision

- a. Develop new partnerships and funding streams to diversify and increase our funding base.
- b. Engage with nontraditional academic partners and constituents while remaining true to our mission.

Innovation

Intentionally engage with municipalities, foundations, the private sector, and other partners to add new cooperators to the partnership and funding of Extension. Address large, complex issues by bringing the full breadth of university resources and expertise to tackle these "wicked" challenges.

Local Relevance

Extension is a recognized, embedded presence in communities, often being the only local connection to land-grant institutions.

Vision

- a. Maintain and develop broad, strong local programming that provides university resources to address local needs.
- b. Effectively engage with underserved audiences by using bilingual materials, developing relevant programming, and applying authentic programming approaches.

Innovation

Develop virtual connections with constituents around local programming needs. Engage in virtual interactions that maintain a feel of localness and extend reach across the state. Create social media videos for historically underserved audiences and non-English speakers (Waterman & Laramée, 2018).

Objectivity

Extension facilitates impacts by connecting to evidence-based research and resources—from within its associated academic institutions and across its broader networks—to deliver objective, contextual solutions to issues.

Vision

- a. Diligently maintain an evidence-based, objective approach to addressing issues on a broad range of topics (youth, natural resources, health, families, economics, agriculture, communities, etc.) at local, state, and national scales.
- b. Stay true to our mission; avoid issue advocacy, and advocate for the use of unbiased, research-based information in decision making.
- c. Objectively facilitate discussions and epitomize the role of being *the* source of unbiased information, and be open to cocreating solutions with communities and

Innovation

Develop a wiki-type website for scientifically objective information generated and approved by Extension that crosses state and national boundaries.

Personal Approach

On the basis of long-standing relationships, Extension focuses on people and works directly with individuals and communities to identify relevant issues and facilitate positive impacts.

Vision

- a. Use both in-person and digital communications to assess constituent needs and provide programming as appropriate for specific situations.
- b. Avoid becoming disconnected and a cyber-only information source—maintain an appropriate balance to maximize impacts while maintaining trust.

Innovation

Use technology to personalize interactions by developing smartphone applications and training that encourages educators to connect directly with clients via video chats and programming.

Statewide and National Network

Extension leverages resources and information from its statewide community and campus networks, national Extension network, and multistate initiatives to deliver proven, evidence-based, high-quality educational programming.

Vision

- a. Expand statewide networks to address new issues and constituency groups.
- b. Leverage regional and national Extension networks to increase breadth and reach of programming.

Innovation

Form rapid response teams that collaboratively engage regionally and nationally to develop coordinated programming around key issues facing all Extension programs (e.g., substance abuse).

Trusted Source of Information

Extension delivers value to constituents because it has invested over the last century in understanding the needs of communities to build long-term relationships, credibility, and networks. This foundation lays the groundwork for the next century.

Vision

- a. Maintain local networks of educators and specialists through a geographically distributed staffing plan.
- b. Develop an inclusive workforce that reflects the diversity of constituents.

Innovation

Intentionally develop undergraduate internships and graduate training programs that prepare future Extension professionals who reflect the evolving demographics and constituencies we work with.

Unique Expertise

Extension supports and develops staff knowledge and expertise in group facilitation and process, program development, evaluation, change theory, and content.

Vision

- a. Expand the understanding and practice of pedagogy as it relates to our intended audiences.

Innovation

Develop academic graduate-level training programs specific to Extension education that support development of expertise,

b. Encourage innovation, and allow risk taking. Address emerging issues—take a proactive approach to be at the forefront.

diversity, and inclusion.

Conclusion

Extension's long-term existence and success has evolved around its competitive advantages. As with any business or organization, it will be critical for Extension to continue to evolve and adapt if it is to maintain its competitive advantages and ensure future success. In Wisconsin and nationally there is a great deal of respect for the work of Extension. However, much like businesses, state Extension organizations need to evolve and innovate or they will become irrelevant (West, Drake, & Londo, 2009).

Businesses and organizations that have become irrelevant failed to recognize what was happening in the market. They were not connected with their customers and missed their changing needs or, worse, thought they knew better than their customers did. Last, they did not examine and change their processes with a focus on their customers. A changing marketplace required changes in the business or organization that did not fit existing processes. Extension is not immune to this potential fate. For Extension to continue to be successful, it will need to concentrate on its competitive advantage attributes to evolve and be proactive in three key ways:

1. Continue to be engaged with individuals and communities to ensure early recognition of trends and emerging issues.
2. Support scholarship and innovation.
3. Continuously improve processes and programming with a focus on customers.

Increased scrutiny of the allocation of public resources requires Extension and institutions of higher education to clearly articulate the value propositions they provide to society, which are identified by our competitive advantages. The approach of focusing on our competitive advantages, although different, is consistent with the public value movement articulated by Kalambokidis (2004) and Franz (2011) that outlines the need to communicate our public value. Relying on the laurels of past successes will not be sufficient. Future success will require a proactive approach to address effectiveness, efficiencies, and impact as components of our public value.

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