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Innovate Extension Events: Creating Space for Innovation in Extension

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Abstract

Extension professionals are being challenged to innovate their work, yet day-to-day responsibilities do not always allow time or space for creativity and innovation. In early 2016, Ohio State University Extension held its inaugural Innovate Extension event, a hackathon-style gathering focused on creative collaboration during which teams competed for grant funds by developing an idea, plan, and pitch over the course of a day. Turnout exceeded expectations, and participants gave high marks to the experience. Due to the event's success, additional Innovate Extension events have been hosted at North Dakota State University, Utah State University, and Oregon State University. This article provides highlights and outcomes.

Keywords: [innovation](#), [creativity](#), [organizational development](#), [change](#), [funding](#)

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Introduction

Extension is historically rooted in the spirit of innovation (Ferguson, 1964; Gould, Steele, & Woodrum, 2014). However, current models, scholarly practices, and cultural characteristics hold the system back by restricting time and opportunity for creative problem solving that can lead to innovation and disruptive change (Argabright, McGuire, & King, 2012; Bronson & Merryman, 2010; Ferguson, 1964).

Innovate Extension is an emerging initiative that has been improved and adapted to fit various needs across the country. The primary goal of providing a safe space to be creative while infusing new perspectives is always at the forefront. During Innovate Extension events, participants are provided with the tools and resources they need to change the way they work and develop responses to internal and external organizational challenges and opportunities. Participants ultimately contribute to building a new culture of innovation.

Innovate Extension events create space for Extension professionals to break out of silos, think outside the box, and become better equipped to work in a rapidly changing world.

History and Background

In 2012, when Franz and Cox were calling for disruptive change in the Extension system, Ohio State University Extension (OSUE) began pilot testing educational technology specialist (ed tech) positions. Establishing these four half-time positions allowed OSUE to examine the benefits of allocating individuals devoted to strategically implementing technology in Extension programming. These individuals served as trainers, coaches, and scouts who scanned the horizon for new educational technology uses. At the same time, hackathons (defined as invention marathons or any event during which people come together to solve problems) were generating excitement as a tool for innovation in the field of technology (Castelle, 2016; Tauberer, 2014). After considering potential positive outcomes and impacts of an Extension hackathon, the OSUE ed techs knew the benefits were vast. However, after discussing the concept with colleagues and garnering feedback, they realized that Extension professionals did not see the same benefits and were not yet ready for a tool that could cause disruptive change and innovation.

The OSUE ed techs' proposal to adapt and facilitate hackathon-style events to address complex challenges failed in 2012. However, forward thinkers in nonprofit and governmental sectors began using hackathon events around the same time. Soon, hackathons began transitioning from useful events for tech hackers and coders to opportunities for businesses, organizations, and groups of any kind to creatively "hack" their way through complex challenges (Castelle, 2016). This momentum and associated general excitement combined with other unique opportunities led to the creation of the OSUE Educational Technology Unit (Ed Tech Unit), after the successful pilot period, and the eXtension Educational Technology Learning Network (EdTechLN), a national learning network for Extension innovators.

These combined factors—along with buy-in from colleagues, support from leadership, and experience from cutting-edge innovators in the system—paved the way for an implementation opportunity that did not exist in 2012. The proposal for an "Innovate Extension" hackathon was once again pitched in Ohio. It was framed as an opportunity for obtaining informal grant funding, during which participating teams would move from idea to proposal to funding all within a day. In May 2016, OSUE held the first Innovate Extension hackathon in Columbus, Ohio.

Purpose and Goals

The general purpose of Innovate Extension events is to provide attendees with time, space, and permission to think creatively. Specific goals of the events are

- to provide a daylong work session for creative thinking and innovative planning;
- to expose participants to new perspectives and collaborative opportunities;
- to inspire teams and individuals to update programs, change the way they work, or develop solutions to organizational challenges; and
- to foster and inspire a culture of innovation in Extension.

Over time, these goals have evolved to fit the needs of each individual event. However, the ultimate purpose has always been to provide time and space for people to think creatively, work outside their comfort zones, and see what happens.

Overview of an Extension Hackathon Event

Each iteration of Innovate Extension has differed from the one before, but the general structure has remained similar across events. Innovate Extension events are about bringing together diverse individuals and teams to collaborate on innovative and creative solutions to Extension's greatest challenges and opportunities. Event coordinators stress the importance of breaking out of comfort zones and encourage teams to include members representing a variety of program areas, position types, and lengths of time in the organization. Some Innovate Extension events also encourage teams to include members from outside Extension, such as community members or university faculty and staff. Furthermore, some events allow self-selected teams, and others require assigned teams to ensure team diversity.

The general agenda for Innovate Extension events is simple: start early in the morning, give participants a generous amount of time to develop their ideas, allow teams to pitch these ideas, and end the event with judging and awards. Although some events include a presentation by an invited keynote speaker to help inspire new ways of thinking, others forego this element to allow more time for teams to work on their ideas. Event facilitators and team coaches help ensure that teams make timely progress on their ideas by prompting them through the various stages of idea development: ideation (brainstorming), idea selection, idea improvement, idea feedback ("soft" pitches to other teams for feedback), and pitch creation. Prompts ensure that teams are guided successfully through idea development.

Throughout the day, teams have access to a variety of human and creative resources. Key informants have expertise in subjects such as technology and are available to help teams better understand specific aspects of their ideas (such as app or website development). Teams also have access to a variety of activities and supplies (sticky notes, markers, drawing boards, sculpting clay, and building bricks) to inspire creativity. Assigned team coaches ask tough questions to help teams narrow their focus and encourage creative thinking (Table 1).

Table 1.

Prompts Used by Innovate Extension Coaches in Assisting Teams

Problem**Prompt presented to team coach**

Team is having trouble coming up with ideas.

Have your team spend 15–20 min brainstorming and recording ideas. Consider spending the first few minutes in silence, allowing individual team members to write their own ideas. After a brief period of silence, allow team members to share their ideas aloud. Team members should withhold criticism of ideas in this stage of brainstorming. Encourage unusual and "out-of-the-box" ideas. The following questions may help your team begin to generate ideas:

- What issues are you facing in your Extension work?
- What issues do your communities face?
- If you could change one thing about Extension, what would it be?
- What is the most inefficient or ineffective Extension policy?
- How might Extension market itself better?

Team is having trouble choosing one idea.

If your team is having trouble choosing between multiple good ideas, have each of the original idea generators give a timed 1-min pitch explaining the potential impact and innovativeness of his or her idea. When all ideas have been pitched to the team, allow each team member to vote anonymously using note cards. As team coach, count the votes, and announce the idea with the most votes.

Team is having trouble thinking outside the box.

If your team is having trouble extending its idea beyond traditional Extension outputs (workshops, fact sheets, curricula, etc.), consider asking the following questions that may help stretch the idea into the realm of innovation:

- What makes the idea different from anything that's been done before?
- What makes Extension the most qualified organization to do the work?
- Approaching the idea from the perspective of its intended audience, what do you think audience members would like or dislike about the idea? What would they be most or least excited about?

Team coaches both internal and external to Extension are a critical component of each Innovate Extension event. Coaches have been recruited from the national eXtension EdTechLN, respective Extension organizations, university staff and students, and local communities. Using coaches from beyond the scope of Extension has been integral to the success of some Innovate Extension events because they allow participants to look at their projects from various perspectives, including from the lens of their target clientele and stakeholders.

The final standardized component of all Innovate Extension events is the judging panel. The culmination of each event provides an opportunity for teams to pitch their ideas, either to the entire group of participants or to a dedicated judging panel. Some events have involved judging panels made entirely of Extension administrators; others have involved more diversity, including community and university members who provide depth to team feedback that Extension-only judging panels sometimes miss. Figure 1 shows an example of a scoring rubric used by judging panel members. Once judging is complete, awards are distributed and teams are recognized. Whereas some Innovate Extension events have awarded tens of thousands of dollars in team funding, others have recognized teams with trophies and certificates. Although funding opportunities have been an important marketing piece for Innovate Extension events, event coordinators stress the benefits of attending (even when funding is not available) to learn new methods for planning programming, conducting ideation and brainstorming, identifying issues, and working creatively.

Figure 1. Example Scoring Rubric Used to Judge Project Pitches at Innovate Extension Events	
Directions: Please rate each team on the four judging criteria below using a score of 1–10. Each team may receive up to 40 points with an additional 10 "Spark Points" for a maximum score of 50 points.	
Clarity	<i>(Zen Statement and Clear Communication of Idea)</i> As a judge, how easily could you pitch this idea to others to gain support and traction?
Market Fit	<i>(Creativity and Innovativeness of Idea)</i> Does the team's idea offer a solution(s) to the most pressing opportunities or challenges?
Mission Fit	Does the team's idea align with Ohio State University Extension's mission, vision, values, and/or identified impact areas?
Resource Fit	Does the team's idea offer a feasible investment with the ability to leverage financial, human, and other resources to continue advancing the innovation?
Spark Points	Was the team's idea particularly inspiring or energizing? Does the idea have unseen potential (ability to be implemented or provide impact beyond initial scope)? You may assign each team up to 10 <i>Spark Points</i> for its idea's ability to spark inspiration or new possibilities.

Innovate Extension Events in Action

Ohio 2016 Event

The OSUE Ed Tech Unit hosted the inaugural Innovate Extension hackathon to allow faculty and staff to network and discuss and develop innovative ideas related to Extension's greatest challenges and opportunities. Extension professionals at all levels of the organization were invited to develop small, cross-programmatic teams and "hack" their way through an idea. From ideation to pitch, event participants had a dedicated work session in which to develop and refine their ideas before pitching a proposal to their peers as well as to OSUE administration for potential funding.

The 2016 Innovate Extension teams each consisted of three to eight Extension professionals; additionally, a creative coach mentored each team through the ideation and innovation process via creative prompts. Members of the EdTechLN, as well as other Extension professionals from across the nation, served as creative coaches. The 2016 event started with a creativity exercise called Life on Mars, which prompted teams to develop a prototype of something essential for living on Mars. Teams built prototypes out of various materials and developed brief statements about their ideas before event participants voted on their favorite prototype. This creativity exercise served as both an icebreaker for teams and a hands-on activity for experiencing the phases of a hackathon.

In the weeks leading up to the event, the OSUE Ed Tech Unit hoped to have at least 50 participants register for the inaugural event. By the time registration closed, nearly 140 people had registered to participate in self-selected teams, as creative coaches, or as key informants in a variety of topic areas. After team pitches, OSUE administration awarded nearly \$35,000 to three teams with the most promising and impactful ideas. Additionally, event participants voted for and awarded a people's choice award for their favorite idea.

Due to the success of the inaugural OSUE event, eXtension offered matching funds of up to \$10,000 for four states to host Innovate Extension events in 2016 and 2017. Those states were North Dakota, Utah, Oregon, and Delaware. At the time of this writing, events had occurred in North Dakota, Utah, and Oregon, and a second event had taken place in Ohio. Those events are described herein.

North Dakota 2016 Event

The Innovate NDSU Extension event was held the day before North Dakota State University's statewide Extension conference in October 2016. The event had 30 participants with county, area, and state appointments. In an attempt to avoid having preformed teams arrive at the event with project ideas in mind, event coordinators allowed participants to register only as individuals. The event coordinators then made team assignments, which resulted in diverse teams of members from different program areas and specialties. To increase diversity, event coordinators invited coaches from both inside and outside North Dakota State University. Although the winning groups did not receive funding for their projects at the North Dakota event, all teams gained the perhaps more important benefits of time, opportunity for creativity, and a resulting idea.

After the event, participants noted in a survey their motives for attending. The top three motives selected were

1. "to have a day to spend creatively" (53%),
2. "to have a chance to come up with innovative ideas and projects" (47%), and

3. "it sounded fun" (37%).

As part of the survey, one attendee identified the positive experience of "getting a chance to talk out issues and see we all are (for the most part) on the same page." This attendee later expressed the belief that "Innovate NDSU was the first big step into a new era for Extension."

Utah 2016 Event

Utah State University hosted an Innovate Extension event in place of its annual in-service meeting for all 4-H professionals in November 2016. Going into this event, Utah State University 4-H administration identified volunteerism as the most substantial inhibitor issue facing the program. It was hoped that an Innovate Extension session would be the best way to develop solutions to this problem and move forward.

As part of registration for the event, 4-H faculty and staff were asked to sign up for one of the following categories of focus: volunteer recruitment, new leader orientation, core leader training/ongoing training, volunteer support, or volunteer recognition. Participants were invited to brainstorm together in the identified category groups at the beginning of the event. Next, they were invited to form smaller teams to further refine their ideas. For example, one team discussed and brainstormed a more focused solution to better train 4-H livestock club volunteers through an online course.

To assist participants with innovative thinking during the event, coordinators used different tools and methods, such as creative thinking cards, productive brain breaks (time-outs), and focus tools (sculpting clay, doodle pads, sticky notes).

At the culmination, professionals and volunteers from outside the Extension system heard and evaluated pitches from participants in a format similar to the television show *Shark Tank*. Prize funds were awarded and served as seed money for moving the participant group's innovation from an idea to a prototype. Winning projects focused on areas of volunteer recruitment and volunteer development. One team put together several recruitment videos and a tool kit to make volunteer recruitment easier, and another team focused on designing 4-H leader training experiences. Both ideas grew and developed with the seed money and, at the time of this writing, were nearly ready for implementation across the state.

Ohio 2017 Event

In May 2017, the OSUE Ed Tech Unit hosted its second annual Innovate Extension event. The 2017 event theme was UrbanX. This theme was selected to encourage participants to focus on an identified organizational challenge, Ohio's unique urban–rural continuum. Urban challenges and opportunities intersect across all communities as their geographies increasingly merge. The event drew over 90 participants across nine teams to ideate and pitch their innovative ideas to a panel of Extension administrators and community leaders.

Additionally, each team was paired with two creative coaches: one community or Ohio State University leader and one Extension professional with a track record of innovation. At the end of the event, all teams were awarded the opportunity to participate in Extension-facilitated Adobe Kickbox training over the course of several months, during which they refined their ideas. Three of the nine teams completed various stages of the Adobe Kickbox training and pitched their ideas to OSUE administration for potential funding in fall 2017.

Oregon 2017 Event

The Oregon State University event was held in May 2017. Registration was open to Extension faculty and staff from all disciplines. The format was similar to that of the 2016 Ohio event. Both preformed teams and individuals were invited. More than 80 participants, judges, and coaches participated in the event. Teams moved through a creativity exercise, inspired by Ohio State's Life on Mars activity, using craft supplies and having a mission of developing a useful tool for the year 2117. Teams then moved to developing a solution to a real problem they faced in Extension. Teams worked with a creative coach to develop and pitch their ideas to the whole group by the end of the day.

Two teams developed similar ideas during the Innovate event. They were awarded \$5,000 to codevelop an "innovation gym" to broaden and share innovation skills among Oregon State University's Extension colleagues across the state.

Participants indicated through event surveys that they appreciated the networking opportunities for faculty and staff who had not been connected to one another previously. They also noted the importance of having time dedicated to innovative work but mentioned that awards presented at the end of the event took away some of the momentum nonawarded groups had generated during the day. Essentially, the groups who did not receive an award were left thinking, "Now what?"

Impacts

Although Innovate Extension was created to bring the system back to our traditional spirit of innovation, creating a culture that supports innovation and a body of Extension professionals who drive our system forward into the modern era has always been the long-term goal. Programs that have been successfully developed as a result of Innovate events are simply "perks." Examples of programs and processes that have been developed as a direct result of Innovate events are

- the design and implementation of a process for identifying emerging issues in agriculture and natural resources in Ohio,
- the restructuring of county Extension advisory committees in Ohio, and
- the implementation of a new process for identifying and implementing 4-H programs in Utah.

A cultural shift from static processes to creative agility is taking place in the states that have hosted these events. Additionally, Innovate events set the foundation for eXtension's Designathon events, implemented in 2018, which train Extension professionals on design thinking and innovation processes. In summary, the success of the first Innovate events contributed to a movement of massive positive change across the nation. Extension now boasts a systematic way of identifying community challenges and opportunities and addressing them through innovative programming and engagement opportunities.

Outlook and Recommendations for the Future

Through the 2016 and 2017 Innovate Extension events, we gained insight into what allows Extension professionals to feel comfortable with the process of innovation. Perhaps most importantly, we have learned that Extension staff need dedicated time, space, and permission to be innovative.

We also have learned that staff need encouragement from like-minded colleagues and outsiders. Placing Extension professionals in creative physical spaces and surrounding them with energy and excitement from their most innovative colleagues and prominent community leaders has proved helpful in allowing event participants to dream big and express their craziest, and perhaps most impactful, ideas.

Finally, we have learned that Extension professionals need incentives to show up at and participate in new and unique events such as Innovate Extension offerings. Some Innovate Extension events have provided small incentives such as books, water bottles, or totes, but overall, event participants have noted that the greatest incentive is the opportunity to pitch an idea to Extension administrators for possible funding.

Extension professionals are being challenged to innovate their work, yet, day-to-day responsibilities, cultural norms, and systemic processes often do not allow time or space for creativity and innovation. Hosting an Innovate Extension event could be the spark needed to bridge this gap. If we are provided with time to deliberately gather and collectively focus on innovation, we will experience innovative practices that have the potential to ignite discovery and bring to fruition great ideas with positive impacts for our organization and the communities we serve.

Hackathon-style events such as Innovate Extension can foster diverse collaboration external to Extension and promote the cultural shift necessary to support innovation in our system. The encouragement and support Extension administrators demonstrate in making it possible for their staff to participate in such events is often critical to the success of those professionals. Investment in unique events such as Innovate Extension should be viewed as an investment in the future of Extension.

Author Note

Jamie Seger was previously the program director for educational technology at OSUE and led the OSUE Innovate Extension events in 2016 and 2017. She has since taken a position with the University Innovation Alliance.

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