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## Evaluating a Regional Administrative Model

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## Evaluating a Regional Administrative Model

### Abstract

Using a stratified random sample and real-time virtual focus group sessions, we evaluated the regional administrative model, addressing personnel supervision, program direction, financial management, and administrative leadership. We concluded that the regional administrative model remains a highly charged topic, there is no common understanding of "region," the efficiencies and effectiveness of county operations have improved, and minor differences exist among groups from areas with differing population densities only with regard to the topic of administrative leadership. Implications relate to using a mix of formal and informal communication approaches, avoiding the consequences of long-term environmental turbulence, vetting the model at all organizational levels, and pilot testing prior to statewide implementation.

**Keywords:** [regionalization](#), [administrative model](#), [evaluation](#)

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## Introduction

Any change can present disruption.

Change that occurs in an administrative structure (overall model or approach used by an organization) can, and often does, present concerns.

Many Extension services are organized by regions, clusters, or districts, with the terms almost interchangeable. The Extension services of Pennsylvania State University (Penn State Extension, n.d.), Washington State University (White & Teuteberg, 2015), University of Minnesota, (Morse, 2006; Morse & Ahmed, 2007), The Ohio State University (Cropper & Merkwowitz, 1998), and Iowa State University (Holz-Clause, Koundinya, Glenn, & Payne, 2012) are examples. At Oregon State University (OSU), moving to a region-oriented system was motivated by factors driven by the university and the economic downturn in 2008–2009.

## Background

In 2008–2009, the United States experienced an economic downturn, which in turn affected OSU and the OSU Extension Service. One result was that OSU mandated a flatter administrative structure. The Extension Service administration made the decision to keep all Extension faculty and staff employed and balance the budget through attrition. Consequently, changes in the nature of leadership and in program maintenance resulted in a smaller Extension Service administrative footprint. Various scenarios were explored for achieving a balanced budget and a smaller administrative footprint. To that end, a three-county regional administrative model was

pilot tested over a 2-year period, evaluated successfully on several factors, and chosen for implementation.

The pilot test was done in three counties with one administrator during 2008–2009. That pilot test proved successful according to the results of focus group interviews in the three counties. By 2011, Oregon had been divided into 12 regions, each with a senior-level administrator. County leaders were appointed to serve as local (county) points of contact, and many programmatic assignments were multicounty assignments.

In implementing this model, the Extension Service protected the programs, prevented fiscal attrition, promoted fiscal responsibility, and flattened its administration. We evaluated the regional administrative model in 2014, 3 years after it had been fully implemented, for how well the change was working for faculty, staff, and stakeholders. Ours was *not* a comparative study. The evaluation, which was *not* intended or construed to be one of personnel performance, involved using stratified focus groups to address a system of administration from an individual perspective.

## Methodology

Our study was specifically designed for exploring how individuals perceived the regional administrative model 3 years after its implementation. We employed virtual, real-time focus group sessions to address the following four areas of interest: (a) personnel supervision, (b) program direction, (c) financial management, and (d) administrative leadership. We used multiple questions to address the personnel supervision and financial management topic areas and one question each for the program direction and administrative leadership topic areas. Specifically, regarding program direction, we asked that the respondent talk about the regional administrator's influence on daily program delivery. For administrative leadership, we asked that the respondent talk about what would help Extension be alive and well in the community—that is, what would allow Extension to thrive. The strata were defined by population density and were metro (areas of predominantly urban habitation), mixed metro (areas of both urban and rural habitation), and nonmetro (areas of predominantly rural habitation). We held 12 focus group sessions, using a video conference system in place for the OSU Extension Service (Poly Com). We conducted three sessions each for faculty and staff for the metro area (for a total of six), two sessions each for faculty and staff for the mixed metro area (for a total of four), and one session each for faculty and staff for the nonmetro area (for a total of two). Additionally, we conducted two individual phone interviews with external stakeholders, for the metro and nonmetro areas. Member checking (verifying with the participant that the content was accurate) occurred after the content was transcribed. All group and individual interviews occurred from October 2014 to March 2015.

## Analysis

Using a constructivist approach, we identified relevant perspectives, interests, and value claims of diverse stakeholders and subsequently helped the stakeholders negotiate diverse viewpoints toward greater agreement about priorities. Although our priorities were reflected in the four topic areas, we needed to identify the multiple viewpoints of stakeholders. In the systematic data analysis, we identified patterns by looking for themes and repetitions. Bernard and Ryan (2010) suggested that when working with qualitative data, once saturation is reached (i.e., when no new themes are identified), one can consider the analysis complete. Those authors also indicated that when discovering themes, more is better (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). From the many themes we identified, we were able to ascertain important ones, relevant to the nine individual questions asked.

## Results

Several salient and important themes emerged and are outlined here.

- The regional administrative model remained a highly charged topic.
- There was no common understanding of what a "region" could be.
  - Respondents indicated that a disconnect existed at multiple levels about expectations of roles and responsibilities of the regional administrator.
  - Respondents also indicated that a "region" should be more than a "collection of counties with a common supervisor."
- The efficiencies and effectiveness of county operations (risk management, safety, hiring, civil rights, etc.) had been improved.
  - Respondents indicated that increased attention to and standardization of practices and procedures had been implemented.
  - Respondents also indicated that policy implications were consistent across Oregon.
- There were small differences among the faculty, staff, and external stakeholders (i.e., general public) for the administrative leadership topic *only*. Specifically, the respondents were asked "What would make Extension thrive in your community?"
  - Respondents from the metro area specified that a marketing professional was needed.
  - Respondents from the mixed metro area indicated that "getting the word out about Extension" and having a unified vision were important.
  - Respondents from the nonmetro area wanted full-time-equivalent faculty reduced through attrition to be returned to full capacity.

## Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

### Conclusions

The regional administrative model became a reality during the Great Recession as a means to bring the OSU Extension Service's expenditures in line with resources, to develop a structure and an administrative option to best serve Oregon, and to provide a resilient, responsive, and sustainable organization. Without question, the adoption of the regional administrative model significantly helped the Extension Service reduce the 15% gap between revenues and costs that existed in 2009. The cost savings in conjunction with new revenues resulted in \$650,000 to offset the loss of state-appropriated and federally appropriated funds. This cost savings contributed to the Extension Service's not releasing any employees whose positions were funded via state-appropriated and federally appropriated dollars during the period.

Although informal feedback from internal and external stakeholders led to improvements and corrections to the

model in early days, our study formally evaluated the model against established goals to learn whether the expected results were being realized. Our evaluation identified adjustments needed to achieve those goals and suggested ways to build, advance, and evolve the model in the future. The regional administrative model is now an integral part of the OSU Extension Service and will remain so for the near term.

## Recommendations

The recommendations that follow are based on (a) key findings of our evaluation, (b) member feedback from discussions about the evaluation process and findings, and (c) nearly 4 years of experience with the regional administrative model. They apply to the OSU Extension Service but also may have value for Extension systems elsewhere.

1. Develop a common understanding of what a "region" can be. Can a region be more than a "collection of counties"? How can the Extension Service add value to the concept of "region"?
2. Change the language from "county operations" to "regional operations." A more inclusive and expansive mindset relative to being responsive to needs at both the county and the region levels better positions the OSU Extension Service to build from a rejuvenated foundation and meet its 21st-century needs.
3. Resources permitting, allow regional administrators to be leaders; reduce management workload. An updated regional administrator position description is needed, and it should be explicit and transparent about expectations for leadership.
4. Appoint a task force to more clearly define and standardize the role of county leaders. As OSU Extension Service transitioned to the regional administrative model, the county leader role was still shaped by the unique situation and needs of each county. This circumstance has caused confusion and concern among internal and external stakeholders.
5. Resources permitting, hire a marketing and communications professional who will focus on developing a unified message, establishing brand identity, and publicizing program impacts for the OSU Extension Service.

## Implications

Turner and Müller (2004) advocated for the use of a mix of formal communication disseminated by organizational leaders and informal communications shared among colleagues. The OSU Extension Service values the latter (informal communications) and has put in place a mechanism (the regional administrative model) that allows for the former (formal communications) among OSU Extension colleagues. The OSU Extension Service believes that information will be disseminated across the organization. The OSU Extension Service has avoided the consequences of organizational restructuring—that is, long-term environmental turbulence (McKinley & Scherer, 2000).

Jespersion (2004), in regard to the regionalization of rural water districts, reinforced the idea of transparency and open dialogue in such efforts. The OSU Extension Service administration vetted the regional administrative model at all levels and pilot tested it before going to a statewide implementation. The open dialogue during the vetting process allowed people to voice opinions and concerns. We believe this was important because the entire organization received the same message and the process continues to the present.

Extension professionals following the Turner and Müller (2004) recommendation of a mix of formal and informal communications and the Jespersen (2004) recommendation of transparency will find shifting to a regional administrative model desirable. Relevant conversations need to engage and inform all levels of the organization, including external stakeholders. Extension professionals can benefit from the challenges faced as a result of implementing a regional administrative model. Regional administration provides for the conservation of scarce resources, multicounty assignments, and streamlined lines of authority. By looking at alternative approaches to administration, in this case regional administration, all Extension professionals will be able to continue to provide their states with Extension services. It is time to set aside the "no cookie cutter" mentality and identify common issues and themes that need attention across a region, leveraging resources (time, talent, and dollars) to make new impacts.

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