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Extension Community Development: Building Strong, Vibrant Communities

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Extension Community Development: Building Strong, Vibrant Communities

Abstract

Extension community development (CD) became part of the work of the Cooperative Extension Service in the mid-1950s, but the seeds of the CD program were planted with the release of the Country Life Commission in 1909. This article traces a brief history of Extension CD, along with the current priorities of this program area. Key issues that the Extension system and the CD program must address in the years ahead are discussed, as well.



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Introduction

The Smith Lever Act of 1914 was instrumental in establishing the Cooperative Extension Service as the main vehicle for delivering new developments in agriculture, home economics, and related subjects to farmers, homemakers, and youth (APLU, 2012; Conglose, 2000). But the 1909 Country Life Commission, whose report served as the impetus for the creation of the Extension system, advocated for a broader set of activities, many that align with the goals of the Extension community development program.

The Challenges of Community Life: A Brief Historical Review

The Impetus

The establishment of the Extension Service was, in no small way, the product of the 1909 Report of the Country Life Commission (Bailey et al., 1909). Because a majority of people at that time were living in rural America, and agriculture was the key driver of the economy, the welfare of farmers and the farm household were of central concern to the Country Life Commission. But the commission's vision was to do more than attend to the needs of agriculture and home economics. In many respects, it advocated for programs that would improve the vitality of rural communities.

While the 65-page commission report noted the need to enhance the profitability of farming, it called for the expansion of new industries and economic interests; promotion of social cohesion; improved efficiency of local government; growth in a cooperative spirit that engaged people as participants and contributors; enhancement of games, recreation, and entertainment from native sources; preservation of the natural landscape and improved capacity of people to appreciate such beauty; creation of social centers "where real neighborhood interests exist"; and inspiring farmers, clergy, teachers, and others to answer the leadership call by lending their service to "up building the community" (Bailey, et al., 1909: 48-56). Despite the ambitious list of activities delineated in the report, commission members concluded, "To accomplish these ends, we suggest the establishment of a nationwide extension work" (Bailey et al., 1909: 56). No doubt, the need for community development work was promoted by the Country Life Commission decades before it became a recognized component of Extension's outreach work.

Community Development Begins to Take Root

The recognition of community development as an official part of the Cooperative Extension Service system occurred in 1955, with the passage by the U.S. Congress of a modified Smith-Lever Act. The 1955 Act gave Extension the authority to help supplement farm income by strengthening and expanding industries. Moreover, the land-grant system was allocated additional federal funds to hire rural development agents (Phifer, 1990). A further modification of the Smith-Lever Act took place in 1961, with the addition of Section 3(d) that allowed for the use of federal funds to support community resource and economic development initiatives (Urbanowitz & Wilcox, 2013).

The watershed event for the land-grant university-based community development program occurred in 1972, with the passage of the Rural Development Act of 1972. According to Roth (2002: 5), the Act "ushered in a new era of Federal rural development policy, one that explicitly designated rural development as a Federal policy goal with specific purposes and programs." The one aspect of the Rural Development Act of 1972 that had the most pervasive impact on the community development work of the land-grant system was Title V (one of six titles included in the legislation). It provided for the allocation of funds on a formula basis to state land-grant colleges for research and Extension projects related to rural development and small farms.

An additional element contained in the 1972 bill was the creation of a Special Grants Program to fund rural development research and Extension activities of regional (multi-state) or national significance. It is these resources that propelled the creation of the four land-grant university-based regional rural development centers across the nation (i.e., Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development, North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, Southern Rural Development Center, and the Western

Rural Development Center).

While Extension community development enjoyed significant growth during the 1970s, the 1980s ushered in some challenging times for the Extension community development program. One of the major culprits was the 1981 Agricultural Appropriations Act that called for the folding of all Title V funds into the general Hatch and Smith-Lever formula funds received by state land-grant universities. While these monies were to remain earmarked for rural community development research and Extension, the reality is the funds were slowly redirected to non-rural community development activities (Brown, 1982:275; Beaulieu & Voth, 1984). Further eroding the gains realized in the Extension community development program were the dramatic reductions in Smith-Lever funds proposed during the presidency of Ronald Reagan (Dillman, 1986). While the proposed draconian cuts did not fully materialize, it did set a tone that resulted in noticeable reductions for the Extension community development program (see Ahearn, Yee, & Bottum, 2003). Only in recent years has the Extension community development begun to recover from the major troubles it experienced during the 1980s.

Current Extension Community Development Priorities

The current priorities of the Extension community development program (also commonly referred to as "Community Resource and Economic Development" or "Community and Economic Development") were established by a national team comprised of 1862, 1890, and 1994 land-grant university representatives; Regional Rural Development Center directors/staff; CREES (NIFA) national program leaders; and key National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals members. The group's report, *Strategic Directions for Extension Community Resource and Economic Development*, was released in March 2009 (Southern Rural Development Center, 2009). The following three overarching themes outlined in the document continue to guide the work of Extension community development programs today (Southern Rural Development Center, 2009: 9-10).

Building Economically Viable Communities

Extension CD is exploring avenues to help communities build and expand on their unique assets.

Included are efforts to strengthen entrepreneurship and promote business growth through e-commerce, improve the health of existing firms through business retention and expansion programs, invest in the development of local food systems, promote eco-tourism, and build on the competitive strengths of regions.

Renewing Civic Engagement

Reviving and expanding the civic activeness of local people, institutions, and organizations is a critical prerequisite for gaining traction and support for the tough choices that communities must make today. Thus, CD Extension is pursuing proven and innovative science-based strategies to expand the diversity of people and organizations having an active role in tackling the challenges that are affecting the well-being of communities.

Enhancing Community Decision-Making and Governance

Extension CD continues its long and distinguished history of providing sound data and analysis to guide local decision-making. Furthermore, it is helping local governments and residents assess the alternatives for addressing the changes they face today. This includes the implementation of strategies that promote sustainability (economic, social, environmental, and cultural).

Important Challenges and Opportunities Ahead

While it would be easy to provide a laundry list of challenges and opportunities that the Extension community development program must address in the coming years, we highlight six that we believe are worthy of consideration. The first three are largely internal in nature, noting the important investments that Extension must undertake to position CD as a viable program in the Extension system. The latter three reflect the critical work that CD should pursue as part of its important engagement work.

Invest in People with Strong CD Credentials

During the course of our careers, we often have heard the statement, "all Extension educators are doing community development work." This refers to the reality that most Extension educators are doing community relations work by serving on various boards or participating in community-minded organizations. Community relations is NOT community development.

Doing high-quality community development work requires individuals with sound training in the field of community development, applied social sciences, or other closely related fields. CD is no less complex than the work one would expect from an Extension educator with a specialization in agronomy, animal science, or nutrition. Thus, if Extension is to build a sound community development program, it must recruit individuals with the right mix of academic credentials. Furthermore, it must accelerate and expand the rigorous training needed for Extension educators from other areas and academic disciplines who wish to become substantively involved in Extension community development work.

Sustain/Expand CD Funding

For much of the history of the Extension CD program, funding could be best described as feast or famine. Instability in the amount of resources dedicated to the CD program has impeded the ability of land-grant university researchers to pursue the mix of applied studies that are needed to support the work of CD Extension educators. If Extension is to maintain its relevance in the eyes of taxpayers today, sustaining and expanding funding for Extension CD will be one of the essential ingredients for doing so.

Build Strong Performance Metrics

Federal and state legislative leaders, as well as key university administrators, are demanding greater accountability with respect to the use of public funds. Extension CD must heed the call to develop and implement stronger, more impactful sets of metrics (both qualitative and quantitative) in all of its outreach activities. At the same time, CD can assist several of its stakeholders who are seeking guidance on these very same matters, including developmental evaluation. In our view, Extension CD,

with support from its research colleagues, is well positioned to frame the relevant theory of change and the methodologies and tools needed to collect sound, defensible data on the short-, mid-, and long-term impacts of locally generated initiatives.

Commit to Community Inclusiveness

As the population of many states and communities continue to diversify, Extension CD must be steadfast in its commitment to ensure that all voices are represented in the communities in which we work. It is one of the important values we embrace as part of our community development work. But this is not always easy when dealing with an entrenched leadership that is often satisfied with the status quo. Extension CD educators must continue to find ways to capture the participation and involvement of those who are too often left on the sidelines when it comes to the current and future direction of their communities.

Help Communities Tackle "Wicked" Issues

Communities are grappling with a host of perplexing issues today, be it the quality public education, school consolidation, urban/rural linkages, fracking/natural gas extraction, health care access, adult/child poverty, economic restructuring, outmigration of youth/young adults, race relations, or crime/violence. These represent "wicked issues" because they are complicated and no clear consensus exists on how best to address these difficult matters. Given that Extension is highly respected for its objectivity and neutrality, it makes sense that Extension CD could be an important mediator in helping communities embrace democratic dialogue, deliberation, and action on these issues. Not only can well-trained Extension CD educators facilitate the process, they can identify some of the key options (drawn from the research literature) and consequences that local residents should consider as they seek to take action on one or more of these wicked issues.

Help Extension Re-Imagine Itself and Expand the Vision

Many—perhaps most—Extension professionals, including administrators and contemporary stakeholders, are unaware that the rich history and effectiveness of Extension does not comport with today's consensus view of Extension. Today's view is based largely on the concept of "the expert model" in which unbiased scientific findings are "extended" to the public. While this function is important and legitimate, it is also very limiting.

A broader and more robust vision is one of "engagement," in which local knowledge is incorporated into the educational equation and in which participatory research and other alternative methods of research and learning are emphasized. In this conceptualization, the scientific expert is someone who learns as much as anyone. Indeed, many of the early pioneers of the land-grant university saw its real contribution, especially Extension or engagement, as that of supporting and sustaining democratic principles and values that are at the heart of our national heritage, culture, and future (Peters, 2013; Cordes & Peters, 2014). CD educators are well positioned and skilled to provide leadership for achieving this more expansive view of the power of the land-grant university.

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