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Celebrating JOE's First 50 Years: A Public Good

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Celebrating *JOE's* First 50 Years: A Public Good

Abstract

Understanding our history provides insight to shape our vision of *JOE's* future. As we implement Extension's mission, defining our own personal philosophy is often overlooked. Instead, the focus is on the institution's policies, procedures, and practices. Extension's public good is derived from its engagement with communities. Such engagement requires a commitment among Extension's educators; this commitment must be grounded in understanding engaged scholarship, an evolving process to which *JOE* must contribute.

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Although the issues/topics discussed in the initial years of the *Journal of Extension (JOE)* are similar, as our editor has noted, to those discussed today, the context of these discussions has changed. In 1963, the Cooperative Extension System, to a much greater degree than today, was often the sole source of science-based information available through Extension educators located in the communities in which they lived. In such an environment, those seeking information could—and often would—describe Extension as a public good.

In today's environment, Extension is just one of many resources available—often 24/7—to those seeking information. Now we must ask ourselves, are we fulfilling our social responsibilities as a public good, providing science-based information to those accessing our resources in order to make better-informed decisions, decisions that contribute to the quality of life in the larger community? Meeting this challenge makes *JOE* even more central to the Extension System in its next 50 years. We must articulate the journal's role as it addresses this challenge.

In the first issue, the journal's editors wrote that the journal is "dedicated to the professional growth and advancement of those who have chosen Extension education as a career" (Ferguson & Carter, 1963, p.2). This charge mandates that *JOE* continue its focus on scholarly engagement to ensure that *JOE* is the premier Extension journal in North America (Franz & Stovall, 2012). To do so, we, as

Extension professionals, must understand from where we have come.

The Journal's Viability

The Board of Directors of Extension Journal, Inc. sets journal policies and must ensure *JOE's* fiscal viability as well as articulate its public value. This latter role will be marginalized if the journal's financial viability is questionable. Over its history, *JOE* has been supported through individual and/or institutional subscriptions in order to ensure adequate editorial and technical support to publish a reputable publication. To do so, the Board seeks to identify ways to make the publication available to the greatest number of professionals in the Cooperative Extension System, particularly those who are field-based educators.

Although the primary professional organizations associated with Extension, including ECOP (Extension Committee on Policy), are represented on the Board of the Extension Journal, Inc., *JOE*, unlike many professional journals, is not received as part of one's annual membership. In fact, today a number of these associations are initiating their own professional journals, increasing access to relevant programming resources.

Since 1975, six issues of *JOE* have been published annually. Beginning with the June 1994 issue, the journal moved from a print to an open-access publication available only on-line. All prior issues are now on-line as well. *JOE* was among the first professional journals to become an open-access, on-line publication. Doing so made *JOE* available to every individual in the Extension System. Plus *JOE* could now be accessed by anyone—at home or abroad anywhere at any time. In 2012, individuals in 217 countries accessed *JOE*. In addition to the United States, primary users were from the United Kingdom, the Philippines, India, and Canada.

To better underwrite both *JOE's* editorial and technical functions, the Board of Directors initiated the National Job Bank in the mid-2000s, providing a continuing, although fluctuating, source of revenue. As an alternative source of funding, the National Job Bank helps to ensure the journal's viability, providing the time and resources to improve its quality as a professional resource. The journal's current Board of Directors seeks to maintain and improve "the *Journal of Extension* as a rigorous, referred journal for Extension professionals while ... making use of the latest technologies" to support Extension's mission (J. L. Donaldson, personal communication, 2013). In meeting this challenge, the number of articles published "in each issue has increased from 14 in 2000 to 36 in 2012" (Franz & Stovall, 2012, p.4); the current acceptance rate is 27.8%.

In this ever-changing landscape, how well is the *JOE* fulfilling its role as a public good? First we must ask ourselves is the Cooperative Extension System viewed today as a public good or is it viewed as a private good to be underwritten by those who use it? It's a given that today Extension is one of many educational /informational resources available. As an on-line, open access publication, the *JOE* as well as eXtension can be accessed 24/7.

Public Value Grounds Engagement

Even before Extension was officially established in 1914, Extension agents engaged members of their communities one-on-one through demonstrations and field days. This engagement was "mandated"

in Extension's enabling legislation to "aid in diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture and home economics, and to encourage the application of the same" (Smith-Lever Act, 1914, p. 1). Through subsequent legislation, this mandate has been further expanded to cover topics and issues currently relevant to the quality of our lives and the communities in which we live. This focus is on Extension's public value, not just on the value/benefits to those participating in its programs (Kalambokidis, 2011). Yet in today's environment of shrinking resources and accountability pressures, how can this mandate to extend the resources of the 94 universities of which Extension is a part best meet this challenge?

One approach to articulate Extension as a public good is to define its public value by focusing on a program's value for those who did not participate or more important are not even familiar with Extension and its resources (Franz, 2011; Kalambokidis, 2004; Kalambokidis, 2011). This approach enables the Extension System to communicate its impact on both participants and the larger community. But scholarly engagement through our land-grant universities cannot be defined only through specific programs or numbers.

Another perspective is to define the public good as distinct from its public value. Extending the university to those who are not resident students is mandated by its enabling legislation (Smith-Lever Act, 1914). Its implementation, however, is based, I contend, on our personal philosophy regarding public education, particularly public higher education's roles and responsibilities in the lives of its citizens notwithstanding geographic locations, socio-economic statuses, or topic. Regardless of the issue, if the university has information on that subject, the university through its educators and researchers has a responsibility to translate research knowledge and its practical applications, if any, to those not resident on its campuses. This commitment, I believe, is based on an individual's understanding and commitment to making the university a part of people's lives. Through Extension's university affiliation, those participating in Extension's programs should feel the university is *their* university just as much as an on-campus student does. Extension's value, as it has always been, is making knowledge of the university available to and accessible to the public.

As an open-access journal, *JOE* can 1) provide programming content and strategies, 2) address internal organizational issues through research, features, and commentaries, as well as 3) contribute to the continuing professional development of its personnel, an objective stated by its editors in the journal's inaugural issue (Ferguson & Carter, 1963). Extension is often compared to an elephant. The public and perhaps Extension's own personnel only know that part of Extension that touches them. Yet *JOE* must help its readers address what Extension is and what Extension can be in today's world. As an educational organization, Extension should engage its publics on a continuing basis, not just in one-shot programming on a topic. Extension is not a business. Rather it is an educational enterprise, integral to community engagement in higher education (Franz & Stovall, 2012). In this process, it is imperative that each of us, as Extension educators, defines our personal philosophy regarding scholarly engagement.

Such engagement is a complex, evolving process. As one's understanding of engagement evolves, it provides the rationale that informs the interactions of Extension educators in their communities as well as their employing organizations. The focus of this rationale emphasizes what engagement means to me, as an Extension professional, to extend the university into the community.

Engagement is an interactive, reciprocal, not prescriptive, process on issues of shared public concern. Engagement is an individual, not an institutional, perspective. The latter emphasizes organizational structures, policies, procedures, and practices. Our challenge is to cross these boundaries. To develop one's personal understanding of engagement requires a safe environment within an organization to explore and reflect in order to determine what ought to be, thus transforming outcomes (Fear, Rosaen, Bawden, & Foster-Fishman, 2006). This collaborative paradigm stands in sharp contrast to the expert knowledge/technology transfer model (Franz & Cox, 2012). How we define engagement influences how we practice engagement in the communities in which we live and work (Fear, et al., 2006). Engagement is both an intellectual and moral philosophy that influences the programming in which we engage with the community. Our language and our practices are shaped by how we understand engagement. Our engagement must be *with* the community, not only *for* the community.

As I have previously written "engagement reflects a philosophy shaped over time by experiences, opportunities and context" (Thomson, 2008, p. 116). Engagement reflects how each of us understands and practices engaged scholarship. Do we, today's Extension educators, understand and practice engaged scholarship? The *Journal of Extension* must contribute to this evolving process.

About the Author

Joan S. Thomson, Penn State professor emerita of agricultural communications, served as editor of *JOE* from 1981 through 1983. From 1996-2005, she served on the Board of Directors of Extension Journal, Inc. first as the representative of the Northeast Extension Directors and later as a member-at-large. During this time she served as the president of the Board and chaired the editorial committee. Currently, she is serving as one of *JOE's* peer reviewers.

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