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## Extension's Evolving Alignment of Programs Serving Families and Youth: Organizational Change and Its Implications

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## Extension's Evolving Alignment of Programs Serving Families and Youth: Organizational Change and Its Implications

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**Abstract:** *Extension is experiencing a trend toward closer alignment of its programs serving families and youth, notably Family and Consumer Sciences and 4-H Youth Development. Projects are more multidisciplinary and comprehensive than in the past, and, in many states, FCS and 4-HYD are also becoming more administratively integrated. Several reasons for this shift are recent developments in social science*

*intervention theory, Extension budget reductions, and land-grant universities' long-term organizational strategies. We discuss implications for Extension faculty and the need to track and understand the restructuring process. Overall, the emphasis on collaboration and comprehensiveness provide opportunities for more effective Extension programming.*

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## **Introduction**

Across higher education, a powerful theme of integration is catalyzing changes in how universities are organized and how faculty accomplish their work. Academic research centers are being created to break down disciplinary silos. Instructional programs are being challenged to help students make connections across various fields of study. Community-based interventions are becoming more holistic in approach, more multidisciplinary in nature, and more complex in function. Funders of such work are requiring increased evidence of collaboration. The rationale for this trend is that by utilizing multiple disciplinary approaches, we are better equipped to handle the complexities of creating lasting change in the fast-moving modern world (Croyle, 2008; Jacob, 2008; Stokols, 2006).

Extension is experiencing this trend toward collaborative, multidisciplinary work as well (Blewett, Keim, Leser, & Jones, 2008; Thering, 2009). Extension's two primary programs that serve families and youth—4-H Youth Development and Family and Consumer Sciences—are increasingly joining forces to address complex challenges in society on topics as wide-ranging as obesity prevention, workforce development, family finance, cultural competence, and life skill development. In many community-based projects in recent years, lines can become blurred regarding which individual program might have primary "ownership" or administrative authority.

In addition, at many land-grant institutions, Extension's youth and family programs are realigning and combining administratively, for reasons that are driven by budgets and economics as frequently as program strategy. In this article we reflect on these developments in Extension's human sciences programs, focusing especially on the topics of cross-program collaboration and organizational integration.

## **A Trend Emerges**

Recent evidence of this realignment exists at multiple levels of the Extension system:

### **National Institute of Food and Agriculture**

At the federal level, the recent reorganization of Extension reflects the importance placed on a multi-pronged approach to scientific investigation and social programs. Several changes at NIFA inherently foster cross-program collaboration.

- NIFA has organized itself into four institutes. One of these, the Institute of Youth, Family, and Community, combines three divisions that focus on the "people" aspects of Extension work: Family and Consumer Sciences, Youth and 4-H, and Community and Education (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2011). Unlike the previous Extension structure, these programs are now organized under a common administrator. Whereas units previously were often grouped according to function (e.g., all competitive programs together), they now are grouped by content expertise and discipline (S. Le Menestrel, personal communication, October 20, 2011).
- Overall, a greater proportion of NIFA's resources now goes to competitive grants funding rather than formula-based state program funding. NIFA's intent is to directly address high-priority societal problems, which are expected to change over time. The major grants program, the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative, has identified five "primary challenge areas" for funding (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2010). The challenge area most directly relevant to youth and family topics—"Improve nutrition and end child obesity"—clearly requires expertise from both 4-H and FCS. These programs will need to collaborate in order to maximize their talent base and be competitive for these funds.

### **High-Visibility Extension Programs**

From a programming perspective, a great many examples of intensive cross-program collaboration can be highlighted. Here are just two.

- At Rutgers University, the Departments of Family and Community Health Sciences (parallel to FCS) and 4-H Youth Development jointly developed a program entitled Get Moving—Get Healthy New Jersey (GMGHNJ), aimed at promoting healthy eating and physical activity among individuals, families, and communities. GMGHNJ recently received NIFA's 2011 Partnership Award for Innovative Program Models, as well as national awards in 2010 from the American Dietetic Association and the Society for Nutrition Education.
- In 2011, the National 4-H Council received a \$5 million grant from the Office

of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention to fund, on a nationwide basis, the implementation of three Extension mentoring programs: 4-H Life (Missouri) aims to strengthen relationships between youth and their incarcerated parents; Youth and Families of Promise (Utah) promotes mentoring with a central focus on families; 4-H Tech Wizards (Oregon) promotes high school graduation of Latino youth. All three programs have an explicit family component. The Missouri and Utah programs, in particular, were developed through close collaboration between 4-HYD and FCS colleagues.

### **Organizational Integration of 4-H and FCS Within Land-Grants**

Finally, at the land-grant level, there have been several recent cases of organizational integration of family and youth Extension units.

- *North Carolina State University*: In 2006, families and 4-H Youth faculty and staff at NCSU were united as a Department of 4-H Youth Development and Family and Consumer Sciences (North Carolina State University, 2011a). The integration of the two units was motivated by both a vision for the combined department and a university emphasis on cutting administrative units. The programs themselves have not been combined, but personnel work together on educational and programmatic activities. The department has also developed a new master's degree in family life and youth development (North Carolina State University, 2011b).
- *Iowa State University*: In spring 2009, ISU Extension reorganized in response to severe state budget cuts. The families and 4-HYD program units within the College of Human Sciences were combined (Iowa State University, 2011), providing, for the first time, an official academic home for 4-H Youth Development at ISU. Initial integration steps included joint meetings and in-services, development of joint vision and operational documents, a shared internal Website, and creation of four joint program teams (healthy living, military youth and families, urban programming, and professional development). Future grant proposals to the Children, Youth and Families at Risk (CYFAR) initiative now require integrating 4-HYD and families, and Extension staff in 20 regions across the state work jointly on programs for healthy living, financial education, and reducing youth and family risk behaviors (Franz & Fahey, forthcoming).
- *Oregon State University*: In summer 2010, the Oregon 4-H Youth Development

Program and its faculty were moved from the College of Education to the College of Health and Human Sciences, which was already the home of the Extension Family and Community Health Program. The two programs were further integrated in summer 2011, when they were placed under the administrative leadership of a single individual as Program Leader. 4-HYD and FCH remain distinct in terms of budget and supervisory lines, but the faculty from the two programs are being included with increasing frequency in planning sessions, professional development meetings, funding opportunities, and programmatic initiatives.

- *Washington State University*: In spring 2011, WSU Extension integrated the youth and family program areas under leadership of a single program director. The goal of this change is to assure collaboration of programs and greater integration of 4-H youth, human development, and nutrition.

Similar scenarios of administrative restructuring—each with its own distinct characteristics—are occurring in states as varied as Michigan, Louisiana, and California, to name but a few.

### **What's Driving the Trend?**

These changes can be attributed to several factors, which we see as clustering into two main categories.

#### **The Changing Nature of Program Delivery and Translational Research**

Prevention programs typically used to be confined to the educational setting—whether classroom or 4-H club—but that limited program scope is often criticized today. Current prevention programs seek to involve multiple levels of the community, which may include Extension, school, home, the business sector, and/or the built environment. This trend originates from ecological models of human development and behavior that have gained wide acceptance (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Lerner, 2002; Stokols, 1996). These models recognize that factors beyond the individual—including peers, families, communities, culture, and the economy—affect what people believe, how they act, and how they grow. Consequently, it is difficult for programs that operate solely at the level of individual education to produce sustained behavioral change. The ecological perspective has existed for several decades, but its broad acceptance by funders and policymakers, and the resulting expectations for new programs, are more recent.

The ambitious scope of these complex new programs requires collaborative partnerships, for which 4-HYD and FCS faculty are a natural fit. The collaborations might include other Extension units, other campus partners, and community partners as well. To be competitive for grants, especially from national funders such as USDA and NIH, faculty and staff of universities are expected to work across unit boundaries to assemble the teams best able to implement particular projects. The more these individuals work together on such projects, the more they find commonalities in their work.

### **Administrative and Budget Contingencies**

The administrative consolidation of Extension's youth and family programs is often driven by an additional set of administrative issues and strategic aims. For example, many universities are currently reorganizing into structures that reduce the number of colleges or departments. This change may be in response to criticism that an institution is top-heavy with administrators or may reflect a desire to be better positioned to address current challenges such as the environment, the economy, and health. Larger units tend to be multidisciplinary in nature, bringing together scholars of various fields to pursue solutions to complex problems. As a result, there are typically fewer individuals with formal administrative responsibilities and an organization that is flatter or more streamlined. This campus-based trend has carried over to Extension units as well.

As noted in several of the earlier examples, shrinking budgets constitute another major reason for administrative integration. Extension programs are being downsized in many—perhaps most—states. With fewer overall personnel in 4-HYD and FCS programs, consolidation provides savings in administrative support areas.

Finally, consolidation of units often results in less fragmentation and less duplication of services and programs. For example, most universities operate programs that reach out to children and youth, frequently with similar purposes and goals. Some of these programs are supported by research grants, others may be fee-based services to the community, while others are campus-funded and seek to attract prospective students to campus. A state-level Cooperative Extension Service may have separate outreach and engagement programs for young people, operated from different units by different personnel. In this case, consolidation may be driven by frustration among stakeholders who observe seemingly disconnected university-supported programs in their communities.

### **Implications for Extension Faculty and Staff**

From these patterns and realignments, we see several implications for how Extension personnel carry out their work:

- The trend toward cross-program collaborations will most likely continue, and perhaps accelerate, as the science supporting social program intervention advances. These collaborations will include more partnerships with non-academic academic researchers, as well as with community groups and outside agencies.
- The program assignments and the content focus of individual Extension personnel may become more fluid than in the past, changing every few years to keep pace with society's priorities and opportunities for partnerships. An Extension faculty member who has been a youth development generalist for many years may work on obesity prevention this year and may need to switch to different focus areas in future years.
- Through these changes, some skills will remain critical: the ability to develop professional networks, to assess community needs, to creatively seek solutions, and to evaluate the impact of interventions. Due to the greater reliance being placed on innovation, there will be additional demands on the professional expertise of Extension personnel. Professional development opportunities will be a critical component of Extension faculty portfolios.
- Cross-program and multidisciplinary collaboration is particularly important for programs that target vulnerable and high-risk populations. The risk factors that children and families face are deep-rooted and community-wide, making necessary a broad range of professional perspectives to develop and deliver effective programs.
- Internally, faculty and staff will find it easier to locate and engage collaborators. When people are brought into closer proximity with each other, they become more aware of shared or compatible interests and are likely to develop a common work culture. In addition, when people work in the same unit, they are subject to similar rules regarding prickly issues like the handling of overhead or indirect costs for external grants.
- The leaders of new, more comprehensive Extension units will rely less on their technical expertise and knowledge of regulations to guide operations and more

on their ability to think and act strategically, inspire action, and connect resources. They will identify critical areas of focus and sort through ideas and opportunities to determine those that are instrumental for achieving unit goals.

- Leaders must also focus on achieving new goals, showing how the work of each person relates to the success of the unit and helping each person view his/her work as "mission critical." Extension personnel must also have resources needed to act in new or different ways.
- Extension faculty working on innovative programs must be supported in their efforts to expand into new domains. Stakeholders in our legacy programs may not want Extension to change, and expectations that we will deliver certain programs in certain ways are sometimes the biggest impediment to change.
- Integration of units can help Extension faculty and staff work more closely with researchers and each other to document the public value of human development programming (Franz, 2011). This public value helps meet the increased demand for accountability of the use of public funds with legislators, university administrators, and other funders.

## **Tracking and Understanding the Restructuring Process**

Extension has a time-tested strength in its decentralized organizational structure. With the individual experiences of separate land-grant universities across the country, each institution can serve as a naturally occurring experiment in organizational change, and we have an unmatched opportunity to observe the success of multiple approaches. Some of the approaches will be successful; others might turn out to be models for how *not* to pursue program integration.

To benefit from these state-level ventures, we must first be paying attention. Previous *JOE* authors have described the importance of Extension being a "learning organization" (Gruidl & Hustedde, 2003; Rowe, 2010), and we agree wholeheartedly. As Rowe describes, these organizations are characterized by qualities such as continuous learning opportunities, collective vision, and a culture of inquiry and dialogue, among others. To better understand this current period of change, Extension needs to assess the distinct approaches in terms of intra-organizational factors such as climate and morale. This requires identifying and developing indicators to assess where program integration is occurring efficiently, whether a productive organizational culture is being maintained, and whether there are intra-

organizational issues that require attention or modification (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009).

## **Lessons Learned and Recommendations**

As we review our personal observations about the trend for Extension work in the 4-HYD and family areas to become more integrated—programmatically and, in some cases, organizationally—we've discovered some important lessons.

### **Program Collaboration**

- We are returning to a historical concept of Extension youth development and families staff working closely together to holistically improve the lives of youth and families. We believe this is cyclical for Extension and not just a onetime trend.
- Past program parameters and cultural norms often need to be removed for program staff to more fully collaborate. A new playing field has to be developed for staff to feel they have full permission to work together. People may need to unlearn old ways of doing business to engage in new integrative work.
- True integration of programs and program supports takes time. Parallel processes may have to exist side by side for a time until enough supports are in place for true integration to be realized.
- For the most part, Extension's clients don't really care how the university organizes its work as long as their needs are met. In fact, clientele should see services become more convenient due to integration of programs.
- With closer alignment of youth and family programs, Extension faculty and staff should find more coworkers who care about what they do and want to help with that work from an interdisciplinary approach.
- Better program needs assessment, design, implementation, and evaluation can result from family and youth staff working more closely together.

### **Program Integration**

Finally, we provide the following recommendations for Extension systems that are exploring integration of 4-HYD and FCS units:

- Be clear and consistent on the rationale for the integration and the benefits that will result.
- Select leaders at a variety of levels in the organization to champion and guide the integration, including Extension and academic administration.
- Communicate existing models and examples of successful integration, and provide incentives to help cautious staff and faculty engage in new ways of working across disciplines.
- Promote the discussion, exposure, and understanding of the differing cultures of Extension youth and families work, and focus on the richness this provides for the programming environment, rather than the barriers that could be created by trying to have one culture fit everyone.
- Appoint integrated teams of faculty and staff to help guide joint administrative and programmatic functions.
- Explore programming and staffing efficiencies through joint hires.
- Recognize that the drivers for integration are deeply influenced by the politics and culture at each university. Understand these drivers to help improve integrative success for each Extension system.

## Conclusion

The shift toward greater integration of Extension's family and youth programs is occurring in a number of variations and for a number of disparate reasons, which include program philosophy, long-term organizational strategy, and budget stresses. The result is a new generation of Extension programs that are collaborative, comprehensive in scope, and multidisciplinary in design, echoing a larger trend occurring more generally in the social sciences. We believe this is a welcome development, which positions Extension well for the future as we keep pace with progress in translational research and the science of social program interventions.

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