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Fairs and Other Exhibitions. Have We Really Thought This Through?

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Abstract: "The Fair" is deeply woven into the very DNA of Extension. Investment of time and other resources in fairs by Extension personnel makes it arguably the largest single program in all of Extension. Perhaps it is so much a part of our program that we seldom think to examine our involvement or evaluate why we do what we do in regard to our role(s) in conducting those events. This article questions the remarkable dearth of information regarding the actual value of the fair in regard to youth development as opposed to other means of fulfilling our mission.

Introduction

County fairs, local fairs, state fairs, achievement days—regardless of what they are called in your area—most county and/or district-level Extension programs have them. On the surface, they can look and feel very different from place to place. However, if you look more deeply, you'll notice that very common and predictable themes play out.

In your area, the fair may be a large event with concerts, tractor pulls, livestock auctions, and the like. Or your fair may be a "smaller" event, centered mostly around 4 H exhibits—with or without animals. Regardless of the name or format of the exhibition you find yourself working with, for the sake of this discussion, let's just call it "The Fair."

In talking about the fair, it would be simplistic to talk about the fair as merely an annual event. More accurately, it is the fair "process" that takes place throughout the entire year that must be understood and considered. No fair takes place without uncountable hours of committee meetings, project meetings, parking lot discussions, phone calls, traditions to manage, letters written, and board meetings that take place throughout the year—many discussions dealing with issues that go on and have gone on for many years.

There is no doubt that "The Fair" is deeply woven into the very DNA of Extension. Perhaps it is so much a part of our program we never think to programmatically or administratively examine our involvement or evaluate why we do what we do in regard to our role(s) in conducting those events.

The amount of time and other resources devoted to conducting fairs by 4 H agents, livestock agents, county administrators, paraprofessionals, support staff, and other faculty and staff adds up quickly. Investment of time and resources in local and state fairs by Extension personnel makes it arguably the largest single

program in all of Extension.

Where Is the Research?

Fairs are obviously very important to many people. So important that Extension seems to have rarely questioned whether the investment of staff time is really "worth it" or not. In fact, there seems to be very little published evidence regarding the value of the fair process and the value to young people in terms of life skill development. One of the reasons for this apparent lack of research may be that fairs are so *complicated!* One example of recent research is a study conducted by Arnold, Meinhold, Skubinna, and Ashton, (2007). A very few other articles make contributions to philosophy and need for research regarding the overall value of the fair, such as the contribution by Diem and Rothenburger (2001).

There has been a surprisingly small smattering of research to measure the developmental outcomes for young people when we reflect upon the depth and investment they and their families make in the fair. One might assume (and many people do), that exhibiting livestock, for example, for many days or at many shows during a year is a more valuable and richer experience for young people than "merely" exhibiting a plate of cookies. This may indeed not be true at all. Anecdotally at least, there seems to be no connection between the number of fairs a member attends or the number of days spent exhibiting and the level of development in a particular young person in regard to them becoming more caring, competent, contributing individuals as adults.

There are some general presumptions with which many or most Extension faculty and staff might agree based upon years of practice.

- There is ample anecdotal evidence on the value of fairs (from people who really like the experience).
- "The Fair" is woven into our organizational and community fabric.
- Many Extension faculty and staff members gain self-fulfillment through their own immersion in the fair process.
- Extension seems to gain copious quantities of "street-cred" through facilitation of the fair process. And, perhaps, gain a bit of political capital as well.
- The fair may create social capital within the 4 H and Extension organizations.
- The fair is a useful event toward which project work is often focused and through which project and leadership development can be focused. The fair is an opportunity for young people and adults to exhibit their accomplishments, form friendships, develop independence, and demonstrate mastery.
- Young people sometimes cite that exhibiting at the fair grants positive public exposure that is usually only accorded successful school athletes.

Have We Really Thought This Through?

In retrospect, it is puzzling that Extension in general and the 4 H program specifically quietly and passively allowed such a large investment of staff and other resources to evolve with apparently little thought or consideration in most cases. That commitment to a singular event in almost every county is substantial.

If we were to believe our own press releases, we'd sleep well—confident that our time and energy devoted to conducting the County Fair, District Fair, or State Fair is steeped in research-based information and philosophy. The truth is, there is a remarkable dearth of information regarding the actual value of the county fair or state fair in regard to youth development. And yet, most forge ahead—with little thought or introspection.

The easy way out of this whole discussion would be to simply say that the fair is just one component of an overall youth development program. In a general sense, that may be true. Yet the actual Extension mission in many cases seems to be to merely conduct a smooth-running fair with as little conflict as possible.

Where Are We Going?

What is the 5-year or 10-year goal of Extension in regard to our role, goals, and mission with the fairs in your local or state Extension program? What is the research agenda and intention regarding fairs in your state? If there is a stated or tacit expectation by program leaders and administrators that local and state Extension staff continue with a high investment in facilitating and conducting fairs, are the appropriate resources, management tools, and programmatic supports made available at a level commensurate with the actual time and other resources expended by staff in the field?

Of course, taking a close look at Extension's investment in fairs could call forth the wrath of commodity groups and the public in general—those who believe that Extension putting on a good local fair is a large part of why they support Extension in the first place! Producers of show-stock and others who have a deep financial stake in 4 H and FFA exhibition opportunities may not look kindly on Extension asking the hard questions—regardless of the conclusions that may eventually be reached.

Yet, if Extension is to be true to its research-based mission (USDA, 2010), we cannot overlook the need to be thoughtful and intentional in examining the true value of fairs and our appropriate role in them beyond simply maintaining comfortable traditions that are popular to some. Are the procedures used and the time invested by Extension truly guided by research-based information? Could the same educational content be more effectively delivered in other ways with a similar or lesser investment of time and resources?

On the other hand, it may be that Extension's investment in such events has been a remarkable, resounding success for nearly 100 years or so. At present, we act as though that is indeed the case, with little evidence to support that. Fairs are popular, to be sure. But are they *important*? Perhaps they are.

With tight Extension budgets in states throughout the country, now is the perfect time to critically examine our role in fairs, festivals, achievement days, and similar events to make sure that we as Extension staff and the public as a whole are getting the best bang for the buck. Now is the perfect time to be thoughtful and intentional and begin significant efforts to measure and prove (or disprove) the value of Extension's role in perhaps the largest single investment in all of Extension.

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