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## Minnesota Extension's Regional and County Delivery System: Myths and Reality

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## Minnesota Extension's Regional *and* County Delivery System: Myths and Reality

### Abstract

In January 2004, the University of Minnesota Extension Service adopted an innovative regional and county delivery system to handle major cuts in state funding. This article addresses eight misconceptions that have arisen regarding the new system and concludes that Extension is having far greater impacts than it would have had without this reorganization.

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## Introduction

In 2003, Minnesota faced its largest fiscal crisis ever, affecting all state agencies, educational institutions, and local governments. A number of counties reported they might not be able to fund all or a part of the University of Minnesota Extension Service (Extension) in 2004. In response, Extension adopted a **regional *and* county** delivery model in 2004 with the following features.

1. Extension placed specialized educators in 18 regional centers, funded entirely with state and federal funds.
2. Counties were given the option to purchase local positions, paying a fixed fee covering the full costs with no state or federal funding.
3. All field programming staff, both regional and county, were supervised by faculty or specialists in their area of expertise rather than by district directors.
4. Program teams were expected to develop business plans that clearly identified educational goals, public value (Kalambokidis, 2004), audience, market/needs, potential partners and competitors, delivery plans, evaluation plans, and financial sustainability.

Since January 2004, Extension has operated quite successfully under this new model. The discussion within Minnesota has shifted from structural questions about the delivery model to documenting program impacts. However, we continue to hear questions and misconceptions about the changes we made from Extension personnel in other states. This article addresses some of the more common misconceptions.

### Myth #1: Minnesota Extension Service Is "Falling Apart"

There is no question that the changes we went through were painful. But now we are thriving and growing. For example:

1. Some 410,000 people participated in 2005 programs, up 20% over 2004.
2. Nearly 5 million different people per year access Extension via the Internet; visits increased 250% from 2003 to 2005.

3. Campus faculty and field educators are working more closely together than they have in 30 years.
4. Fifty-four statewide program teams are working closely with their target audiences to develop and adapt programs to address critical local needs.
5. The University provided an additional \$1.9 million in recurring funds to expand our programs, with \$500,000 dedicated to community-based regional economic development.
6. Counties contributed \$13 million to Extension in FY2006, up 7% from FY2005 and 14% from FY2004.

## **Myth #2: Many Field Staff Members Would Like to Move Back to the Old System**

Immediately after the change this was true, but today it isn't. At a national conference in February 2006, an educator from another state asked one of our regional educators, "What is happening at Minnesota? You and your colleagues seem so enthusiastic about your work, and you seem to have such good teamwork. What is going on?" Our educator (who did not welcome the change initially) told me she explained our new system and the changes, summing up with, "The changes were really difficult . . . but now none of us would go back to the old way." While I doubt this is true for 100% of our employees, it does appear true for most of them.

## **Myth #3: All Field Staff Members in Extension Were Moved to Regional Centers**

Most (62%) field staff members are in county offices; 38 percent are in regional centers. Every county except one has a county office.

**Table 1.**  
Location of Field Educators and Support Staff

<b>Location</b>	<b>Persons</b>	<b>FTEs</b>
In county offices	353	307
In regional centers	213	211
Total	566	518

The county programming staff is concentrated in three areas: 4-H, nutrition education (federally funded), and agriculture. The 130 regional educators and 100 campus faculty work in all five programming areas: community vitality, family development, natural resources and environment, youth development and 4-H, and agriculture, food, and environment. For the number of people in each program area and area of expertise, see Morse and O'Brien (2006).

## **Myth #4: Educators and Program Staff Were Cut by 80%**

While Extension's budget was cut by \$7 million (13%) due to the state's \$4.5 billion budget deficit, there are 90% as many field staff members doing educational work as before because field administration was cut so heavily (19%). However, there were major shifts in the nature of the field positions. There were 217 (86%) fewer county-based generalist educators, 61 (321%) more county-based 4-H program coordinators, 10 (10%) fewer nutrition education assistants, and 130 new regional educators. More than half the counties purchased local agricultural positions, and 96% contracted for 4-H program coordinators.

These "before and after" comparisons are misleading, however, because the loss of state funding means there would be fewer Extension staff even without structural change. The relevant comparison is to compare the employment levels without the restructuring and with the restructuring, also known as a "with-without" comparison. As shown in Table 2, we estimated that with restructuring there are 31% more programming staff in the field, 19% fewer administrative and support staff, and 7% more total field staff than there would have been without the restructuring (Morse & O'Brien, 2006).

**Table 2.**  
Field Staff With and Without the Change to Regional & County Model

<b>Extension County/Regional Educators or Staff</b>	<b>Without Restructuring FTEs</b>	<b>With Restructuring FTEs</b>	<b>Change (FTEs)</b>	<b>Difference (%)</b>
Programming Staff in Field	254	333	79	31%
Total Field Administrative and Support Staff	228	185	-43	-19%
Total Field Staff	482	518	36	7%

Some will suggest that we can never be sure about these estimates. While we are confident they are very reasonable, the only way we could have been absolutely certain about the "without restructuring" estimate in Table 2 would have been not to do the restructuring. While this would have been easier for Extension administrators and allowed them to clearly put the blame on the state funding crisis, it would have been highly irresponsible.

### **Myth #5: Access to Extension Has Been Reduced**

Actually, access to specialized expertise has increased in three ways.

First, regional educators are specialized in a specific area of expertise and work over a larger area of the state. Before 2004, most field staff members were generalists, and most specialists were on campus. In this respect, the public has greater geographic access to specialized educators than ever before.

Second, communities of interest (special groups and audiences that come from many parts of the state) have much greater access to specialized program teams of regional educators and campus faculty than before. Program teams work closely with these communities to identify emerging educational needs and deliver these programs.

Third, Extension is reaching more people via telephone answer lines and the Internet. In 2005, Extension handled more than 36,000 phone calls on the toll-free phone lines, and nearly 5 million different people accessed Extension information via our Web site <<http://www.extension.umn.edu>>.

In early 2004, many stakeholders were concerned about not having as many Extension educators in the counties. While some still are concerned, increasingly people are realizing that county boundaries were originally set so people could get to the county seat and back in a day by horse, while today people are used to traveling much farther--and have email and the Internet.

### **Myth #6: The Public Lost Its Voice in Setting Extension Priorities**

Communities of interest today have greater input into setting priorities for Extension programs. Every program team is using market research, evaluations, and ongoing discussions with group leaders to learn what programming these communities of interest want and how they want to receive it.

Counties have greater choice in selection of local positions and greater clarity on roles of the local staff. Before 2004, counties had input on the type of position, but Extension had to balance the need for a fleet of people in a given area of expertise. Starting in 2004, counties could select the type of local position they want to sponsor. Now, the local positions really are "the county's" positions. Further, counties can hire any local position from a menu of positions supported by regional and state specialists.

The positions have adapted to suit local needs. For example, most 4-H program coordinators work only in one county. In agriculture, many counties share people with one or two other counties.

### **Myth #7: The Shift to Regional Centers Was the Major Component of the Change**

The shift in supervision of field educators was equally important. Before January 2004, the field

staff was supervised by seven district directors. In 2004, all supervision of field staff moved to the five program leaders (called "capacity area leaders" in Minnesota). To ensure sufficient supervision and leadership, an additional 19 individuals (13 FTEs) were assigned to work under the program leaders to provide direct supervision. These direct supervisors, called "area program leaders" (APL), supervise the regional educators in a specific area of expertise.

The major advantage of this is that supervisors better understand the work of those they supervise. A second advantage is that program teams can respond more quickly to new issues because everyone on the team has the same supervisor. Before, educators on a program team often had up to eight different supervisors--a state program leader and seven district directors

A list of the 17 areas of expertise and the home department of APLs is available (Morse & O'Brien, 2006).

## **Myth #8: A Change Like This Is Right for Everyone**

Probably not. A state can only make this type of shift under highly unusual circumstances. Minnesota had no choice because of the 13% statewide budget cut. Without this restructuring, we almost certainly would have lost more of our programming staff. With it, we were able to save some jobs and make shifts that are leading to greater program impacts and greater access to specialized field staff. We are confident that this will prove to be a successful approach for Minnesota.

While we strive to someday be the best Extension Service in the nation, we know that we will need to earn this based on the public value of our programs, not on our structure. We encourage other states to study our experience and to ask us challenging questions.

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**Discussion**