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## Applied Extension Research in an Era of Devolution

Thomas W. Blaine

*Ohio State University Extension*, [blaine.17@osu.edu](mailto:blaine.17@osu.edu)



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## Applied Extension Research in an Era of Devolution

### Abstract

In recent years, the trend in devolution (placing funding burdens and decisions for programs at more decentralized levels of government) has not only taken shape, but has accelerated. With changing priorities for the federal government, it is clear that higher portions of funding for other government programs must be borne by smaller units of government--if they are going to be provided at all. This Commentary argues that applied Extension research conducted at the local level can keep the organization relevant and vital in this new era of devolution.

### Thomas W. Blaine

Associate Professor  
Ohio State University Extension  
[blaine.17@osu.edu](mailto:blaine.17@osu.edu)

## Introduction and Problem Statement

Extension has an impressive history of providing combinations of educational programming and applied research that have had important impacts on the lives of people throughout the United States. The traditional formula for funding for all of these initiatives has involved a blend of federal, state, and local government expenditures--along with nominal fees occasionally paid directly by clientele who use Extension materials or attend Extension programs, workshops, and seminars.

In recent years, however, the trend has been clearly established that the federal government has been providing smaller portions of Extension budgets, leaving state and local governments to pick up the tab--or else requiring Extension to make substantial budget cuts that have led to a scaling back of a variety of Extension activities (McDowell, 2004).

Despite euphemistic admonitions from marketing and management schools of thought about "doing more with less," the economic principle of opportunity cost achieves primacy here, as it always does. Fewer resources from the central government will in fact require Extension educators to change the way we operate--not by doing more with less, but by changing priorities within the context of our mission--and there appears to be a consensus that we should be prepared to do so (Bull, Cote, Warner, & McKinnie, 2004; King & Boehlje, 2000).

It is important, in fact essential, to note at this point that the trend away from central government funding of Extension (devolution) is by no means limited to Extension. It includes government funding priorities all across the board, involving a host of publicly provided goods and services that Americans typically expect from government, especially related to environmental programs like recycling, but also impacting initiatives such as grants for child care programs.

The trends in devolution show no signs of abating. With additional resources being devoted to the "war on terror," homeland security, expanded military operations abroad, along with prioritizing tax cuts, it seems very unlikely that the federal government will reverse recent trends in funding programs whose costs have been increasingly shifted to smaller, more localized units of government.

But this will put local policy decision makers (county commissioners, city councils, state legislators) into positions where they must decide whether to raise revenues to continue these programs and, if so, how to fund them. Many of these officials will be faced with making decisions they previously would not have to have made. Examples include maintaining a recycling program in order to avoid having to create a new landfill now that the federal monies for the program have been eliminated; upgrading the water treatment plant now that the matching funds have been cut; and expanding

or renovating local streets, roads, and bridges due to increased congestion once the time limit on revenue sharing for such projects has expired.

Many other examples exist, including community counseling programs, youth activities, and creation and maintenance of parks and green space. There are almost certainly others for which these dilemmas are not yet obvious.

## Extension's Role--From Research to Program

So what does this mean for Extension? Because a large percentage of Extension work has always been at the local level and because Extension educators typically work to provide information to local officials, it seems clear that the trends in devolution are favorable to an expanded role for locally focused applied Extension research. This gains further support when considering Extension's association with the land-grant university system, which is among the premier research networks in the world (Smith, 2004; McDowell, 2001; Weiser & Hougum, 1998).

So what is the direction this research should take? Much of it undoubtedly should be aimed at measuring public attitudes toward initiatives that have been proposed--what do residents believe about the merits of these programs?--how do they feel about local funds going to support them?--what should be the source of funding (property tax, usage fee, income tax, real estate transfer fee, etc.)?

There is no doubt that local policy decision makers who have little experience in making these kinds of decisions are highly interested in knowing what their constituents think. Providing these officials with this kind of information should, at a minimum, constitute a significant component of Extension work in this new era of devolution. It seems almost axiomatic that we owe these officials this much.

A key advantage of this kind of work that must not be overlooked, however, is how easy it is to turn this kind of research into programming, which is Extension's traditional strength (Cooper & Graham, 2001). Just as public officials hunger for public opinion results, so do residents in general. One way to get a community excited about Extension work is to produce a program based on public opinion results from members of that community.

Locally driven Extension research projects do not just provide information that residents and officials find useful, they provide a way of demonstrating that Extension takes the community seriously enough to bring university resources to bear in conducting rigorous analyses of topics that are locally important or even vital. This commitment to local community is probably more important in an era of devolution than in previous times.

## The Caveats

Obviously, many Extension educators reading this may be skeptical, because some caveats emerge as obvious. Let's address some of these.

- The specter that may appear to many who consider all of this may be something along the line that highly localized research may involve a duplication of effort, will lead to Extension researchers "reinventing wheels," or will generate research that is not capable of producing materials, methods, or knowledge that can be generalized to various other settings.

But this should not be the case. Science has always progressed by researchers pursuing specific, often highly disaggregated topics. Tying these studies together in a coherent way where others can gain from them and therefore further refine their studies is the principal role of the academic journal, and in this case the *Journal of Extension* should be no exception.

- The quality of the research must be high. Again, the *Journal of Extension* plays a key role here. The review process for the journal is rigorous. Previous issues of the *Journal* are replete with extensive discussions of response rates, the related issue of non-response bias, rigorous statistical tools (Likert scales, regressions) and principles of survey design (reliability and validity).

However, it seems obvious that many Extension educators who engage in applied research will not submit their findings to the *Journal* or to any other journal, for that matter--and that is fine. But what is critical is that, whether the Extension researcher plans to submit research findings for review or not, he or she must adopt the same standards of excellence and competence in any case in order to maintain credibility--which, once lost, is hard to regain.

- Applied Extension research must not be seen as self-serving. Any large organization, including Extension, tends to have an incentive toward engaging in activities that expand its scope and perpetuate its role. That is understandable. After all, one impact of a successful Extension research program in a community would be to improve the organization's status in the community, and in a (very cynical) sense that can be seen as self-serving. But that is completely different from engaging in research projects, for example, that are explicitly designed to demonstrate Extension's effectiveness in dealing with problems or in helping communities achieve objectives.

Unfortunately, a lot of the published research on Extension program evaluation carries this kind of stigma. Not that program evaluation is not important--it is essential (Diem, 2002). But in the coming applied Extension research paradigm described in this Commentary, the role of program evaluation research should be minimized and brought forward once the other applied research programs referred to above have been completed. One rule of thumb is that although the applied research discussed here should be done by Extension, it should not be *about* Extension in particular, but rather about local topics that are important to communities and with which, because of its expertise, Extension came to be involved.

It is important to note that although program evaluation research should form a smaller component of overall Extension research, it may emerge as more important than ever in documenting the impacts that the applied research efforts have had on communities. Moreover, given the experience that program evaluation specialists have in conducting research, their input will be very useful and, in some cases, indispensable to Extension educators who are thrust into the new research environment but have relatively little training or experience in conducting applied research.

## Conclusions

While recent cutbacks in federal government funding of a host of services traditionally provided by the public sector (including Extension) have had some severe implications, this trend in devolution potentially offers a unique opportunity to Extension educators to conduct timely research projects for local officials and members of the public at large. Given that a higher portion of public sector decisions must be made locally now, along with Extension's traditionally high profile in local communities and its link to the research oriented land-grant university system, a symbiosis is emerging here that simply should not be overlooked.

A shift in priorities toward issue-oriented local research is well within Extension's capabilities, but it will mean a change in the specific activities that Extension educators engage in. Integrating program evaluation research resources into activities centering around community-based, issue-oriented research; prioritizing the identification of timely issues in communities; and applying highly rigorous research procedures to these efforts will ensure that Extension provides the kinds of educational services that will benefit communities nationwide in this era of continued devolution.

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