

4-1-2005

The View from County Partners--Extension in Southwest Washington

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Recommended Citation

Stienbarger, D. M. (2005). The View from County Partners--Extension in Southwest Washington. *The Journal of Extension*, 43(2), Article 4. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol43/iss2/4>

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April 2005 // Volume 43 // Number 2 // Feature Articles // 2FEA1

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The View from County Partners--Extension in Southwest Washington

Abstract

Given increasing urbanization and economic transformation, how well does Extension serve its clientele? Using personal interviews, the study described here gauged the perceived accountability and relevance of Extension programs to county governments in southwest Washington State. The study has implications for other regions utilizing significant discretionary funding from county partners. County commissioners like Extension programming but express little ownership in programming often seen as antiquated. Commissioners do not see Extension meeting community needs and invest little time in the partnership. While closer alignment with county priorities will help improve the relationship with Extension, institutional constraints may also play an important part.

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Introduction

Extension offices in Washington State receive varying funding amounts from counties, primarily from counties' discretionary general funds. Extension in Washington State, as in many Western states, faces a serious crisis in funding from county partners due to increased budgetary pressures from other services, such as law and justice. Historically, Extension offices often received county funding with only modest scrutiny by county commissioners. In Washington State, counties provide, at a minimum, office space and equipment in addition to contributions to faculty salaries. Some counties may provide staff or funding for support as well.

In a climate of increasing urbanization and economic transformation, how do county commissioners perceive Extension? The study described here explored the relationship between Extension offices and elected county commissioners in six counties in southwest Washington State: Jefferson, Clallam, Clark, Skamania, Lewis, and Mason (Figure 1). The study attempted to gauge the perceived accountability and relevance of Extension programs to county governments.

The study derived, in part, from a need to evaluate perceptions that local decision-makers often view Extension programs as traditional and relatively static. This region was chosen because of its accessibility to the researcher. While limited to southwestern Washington, the study is relevant to other regions and states that utilize significant discretionary funding from local government partners, especially where those governments face increasing budget pressures.

Figure 1.
County Location



County Demographics

Table 1 provides a comparison of the six counties included in the study. The six counties studied have a combined population of over 560,000, with Clark County accounting for 61% of the total. Clark and Lewis Counties straddle the Interstate 5 corridor between Portland, Oregon and Seattle, Washington.

Table 1.
County Demographics

	Clallam	Jefferson	Mason	Lewis	Clark	Skamania
Population	64,525	25,960	49,405	68,600	345,238	9,900
Population Change: 1990-2000	12%	27%	29%	16%	45%	19%
Median age	43.8	47.1	40.3	38.4	34.2	38.7
Below poverty	12%	11%	12%	14%	9%	10%
Non-white	11%	8%	12%	7%	11%	8%
Average salary	\$24,800	\$23,100	\$26,400	\$27,000	\$31,670	\$26,200
Unemployment	7.5%	6.6%	7.8%	8.7%	9.1%	11.3%
Major employers: Services	29%	29.4%	23.5%	21.4%	27.5%	27.1%
Major employers: Wholesale/Retail	21%	18.3%	19.7%	25.8%	21.9%	10.8%
Major employers: Government	18.5%	16.7%	20.7%	15.1%	12.8%	27.8%
Major employers: Manufacturing			12.2%		13%	12.9%

(Northwest Area Foundation, 2003)

Skamania forms the transition county between eastern and western Washington in the Columbia River Gorge. Its population is concentrated in small towns along the Columbia River. Mason County, while still rural, is located within commuting distance of large population centers along the southern end of Puget Sound. Although Clallam and Jefferson Counties extend across the Olympic Peninsula, their population clusters along the eastern side of the Strait of San Juan de Fuca and the

west side of Puget Sound.

All six counties experienced significant population growth during the last decade. With the exception of Jefferson County, major employers shifted from government and manufacturing to service industries, followed by government and wholesale/retail industries. In-migration brought in people with different backgrounds and needs that, together with natural population increase, have placed greater demand on local services. All counties in the study except Jefferson exceeded the average state unemployment rate (7.3%) in 2002 (US Department of Labor, 2002).

Methods

In 2002, I conducted in-person, open-ended, semi-structured interviews lasting approximately an hour each with county commissioners in six counties. I also conducted phone interviews with Extension county directors from four of the six counties. Two of the 18 county commissioners declined to participate in the study for unstated reasons. Of the six Extension county directors, two did not participate, including the author.

Results and Discussion

Commissioner Profiles

Table 2 shows a group of commissioners generally older than the average resident, fairly experienced in office, with a range of educational backgrounds and a variety of previous occupations. All commissioners are long-time residents of their communities.

Table 2.
Commissioner Profiles

Gender	
Male	15
Female	1
Education	
High school	6
College / degree	7
Graduate degree	2
no response	1
Years in Office	
Average	4.6
Range	1 - 10
Age	
Average	59
Range	41 - 78

Years in County	
Average	47.5
Range	17 - 77
Occupations*	
Teacher/Professor	4
Private Business	4
Public Service	4
Construction	4
Military	1
Law Enforcement	1
* Totals include multiple answers	

What Does Extension Evoke?

Commissioners responded that they associated "Extension" most often with 4-H and agriculture, which they mentioned first almost equally (Table 3). These represent the two primary program areas Extension has promoted historically.

Table 3.
Words Commissioners Associate With Extension

Associated Terms	Times Mentioned	Order Mentioned			
		First	Second	Third	Fourth
Youth/4-H	12	5	5	2	
Agriculture	7	4		2	1
Master Gardeners	4		2	2	
Water Quality	2		2		
Information	2	2			
Education	2	2			
Rural	2	1	1		
Timber	2	1	1		

Nothing	1	1			
Weeds	1		1		
Environmental	1		1		
Dairy	1		1		
Resource lands	1		1		
Community	1			1	
Horticulture	1			1	
Budget	1			1	

Interaction with Extension

Contact

Eight commissioners stated they had some form of contact with Extension on a weekly basis, while a ninth commissioner had semi-monthly contact. Three mentioned monthly contacts, two had contact quarterly, while two did so only annually or semi-annually. Contact frequency was fairly consistent within each county, and there appeared to be no relation to the size of county population or to how well the programs were judged by commissioners.

When characterizing their relationship with Extension, nine commissioners talked of providing funding or office space, while four used the terms "cursory," "distant," or "little engagement." Two commissioners mentioned providing advisory input, and another said the relationship with Extension was "good."

Program and Personnel

Only two commissioners stated they knew how Extension prioritizes its programming. Ten did not assist with Extension's annual planning and two did, while the remaining four mentioned involvement in the budgeting process as their contribution to the annual planning process. One commissioner did not know 4-H was an Extension program.

This data suggest a fundamental disconnect with county partners and indicate that Extension offices need to better align their programming to county priorities. Most offices have not successfully made the connection in commissioners' minds, although several commissioners stated they did not want to be significantly involved in directing Extension due to already heavy workloads. One commissioner, echoed by others, commented, "I don't hear any complaints, so I assume they are doing good work." None of the commissioners participate in faculty evaluations, although six thought this could be important.

All but one commissioner could cite successful collaborations with Extension. Usually these involved program efforts aimed at addressing an issue important to the commissioner. When asked how they would change their local Extension office, four commissioners liked the status quo, one would prefer to eliminate Extension, and six would like more non-county funding for Extension programs and staff. Three wanted Extension to work more in non-traditional youth programs.

Commissioners had few suggestions on changing Extension at the state level because they had little idea how the Extension system was structured beyond the local office.

Critical Programs and Issues

The most interesting findings reveal commissioners' perspectives of how well Extension programs address critical county issues (Table 4). Table 4 also demonstrates important differences in the views of Extension county directors and commissioners. Commissioners listed the actual Extension programs they perceived as the most important for their county, but they did not perceive that these programs address what they saw as critical local issues. Some Extension work may mesh with critical county issues, but commissioners did not perceive it that way. For example, work done to increase small non-industrial private forestland profitability may provide economic benefits to

county residents in ways that do not clearly link program impact to economic development. Clearly, Extension offices could do a better job defining how their programs are linked to counties' critical issues.

Table 4.
Extension Programs and County Priorities

Issues/Programs Listed	Commissioners		County Directors	
	Critical Extension Programs	Critical County Issues	Critical Extension Programs	Critical County Issues
Youth	10	2	4	3
Agriculture	6		1	
Forestry	5		2	
Land Use	3	3		
Stewardship	2		1	1
Food/Nutrition	1			
Water Quality	1		1	
Master Gardener Program	1		1	
None	1			
Budget (less \$)		9		1
Economic Development		5		3
Law & Order/Justice		4		2
Growth Management		4		2
Transportation		2		
Flooding		2		
Employees		1		

Extension county directors' responses essentially matched commissioners' responses with respect to which Extension programs they considered important. However, the two groups matched much less closely on views of the critical issues facing their counties. Commissioners view policy issues as top priorities while Extension county directors view program issues as top priorities. When asked if Extension could help address their critical issues, only four thought Extension could help, and then only on very specific issues (Table 5), such as helping with Endangered Species Act impacts. This aptly illustrates that Extension offices have not made the case to commissioners that

Extension programming positively affects the issue areas concerning commissioners. Two commissioners stated:

"Extension does not keep up with issues in changing times."

"[Extension reminds me of] an antiquated piece of equipment."

Table 5.
Can Extension Help County's Critical issues?

No	4
Maybe/Unsure	6
On Specific Issue	4
No Response	2

Commissioners' uncertainty about Extension's competence to help address urgent problems reinforces the county perception that, while important, Extension programs are not essential when pressures mount on a county's general funds.

Rate of Return

Despite the disconnect noted above, 11 commissioners believed that the rate of return on their investment in Extension was good or very good. One categorized the return as poor, while four thought they received a fair return. When asked if their investment was well matched by WSU, nine commissioners responded yes, while four did not know, and two wanted increased WSU funding.

This generally positive perception possibly arises in part from the relatively minor percentage that Extension budgets comprise of each county's general fund. In western Washington, county general fund dollars contributed toward Extension offices tend to be less than 1% of a county's general fund, and are often less than 0.5% in more populous counties (C. Beus, personal communication, October 22, 2002). County service structures largely eclipse the size and funding for local Extension offices in this region.

Commissioners also tended to see the benefit of being connected to the university and its resources, even though they did not know the amount WSU actually contributed in actual dollars or indirect support.

Memorandum of Agreement (MOA)

Even though Memoranda of Agreements (MOAs) outline the nature of the partnerships between Extension offices and county governments, none of the commissioners were familiar with this document. Six mistook annual budget amendments for the base MOA. This result stems partially from the age of many MOAs, most of which were written or last revised in the 1980s. Three of the four county directors interviewed did not know when their MOAs were last negotiated or signed.

Only two commissioners mentioned potentially important items (water issues and the position of the Extension Chair in the county hierarchy) that might be included in an MOA. This indicates that the nature of Extension's relationship with county partners has become "assumed" and that county partners do not see the MOA as a means of re-envisioning the relationship with WSU. Rather, changes occur based primarily due to pressures on counties' discretionary funding. This might also explain the dearth of similar studies in the literature: Extension has not bothered to systematically explore its relationship with its primary local partner.

It may be time to renegotiate MOAs to better reflect today's funding realities. While posing a risk for Extension offices, renegotiating MOAs could strengthen Extension links with counties. Extension offices risk losing some autonomy, but they could gain increased budget certainty by renegotiating contracts that more explicitly align the work of local Extension offices to county priorities and build in accountability standards. In the long term, this could increase the perception of county partners that Extension constitutes an essential service to county residents. Well-crafted MOAs need not compromise the neutrality of the university any more than grant funding with its requirements for deliverables.

Conclusions and Recommendations

While county commissioners in southwest Washington like Extension programming, they express

little ownership in that programming, they often view Extension programs as unchanging and traditional, and they cannot articulate how Extension meets the pressing needs of their communities. Most commissioners do not invest much time in the relationship with their Extension office. Commissioners also express ambivalence about how Extension fits into the work the county does for its residents as well as how Extension itself fits within the county structure.

This dysfunctional relationship threatens Extension budgets when discretionary funding at the county level shrinks. In this environment, Extension is often viewed as the "first to go." At a minimum, Extension needs to stress how it leverages county funds in the form of grant and partnership funding. Clearly, Extension needs to better communicate with, and demonstrate to, commissioners that Extension addresses county priorities, but with a minimal demand on commissioners' time.

It is also critical to ensure programming meets the "attribution condition" whereby the benefits of programming are attributed to Extension (McDowell, 2001). Often, clientele associate programs with individual faculty members instead of Extension. This also happens with volunteer programs, such as 4-H, where participants and the public associate with the program, but do not relate the program to the institution.

Better alignment with local county priorities may be as simple as deliberately highlighting different aspects of current programming. For example, a program working with local non-industrial private forest owners to better manage their forests might emphasize the economic development aspects of this work. In other cases, alignment with county priorities may mean refocusing existing programs. For example, if substance abuse is a local priority issue, 4-H offers the infrastructure to work with youth on this issue.

In more extreme cases, some programs may simply not fit local priorities even when they continue to draw participants. The challenge becomes how Extension sheds these less relevant programs heavily invested in by staff. Extension programs often get "captured" (McDowell, 2003) by clientele groups whose adverse reactions Extension prefers not to risk, regardless of the merits of reallocating resources. This contributes to the perception of an antiquated Extension.

The survey certainly indicates that Extension in southwest Washington should work to identify county priorities (perhaps through strategic planning documents) and determine how well its programming serves county residents. Extension must then decide how best to market or promote its programs to county commissioners. In some counties, it may be possible to work directly with commissioners, perhaps by choosing one project to focus on.

Renegotiating MOAs to include performance-based outcomes in return for some budgetary certainty represents another strategy. Crafting the MOA as a framework document would maintain flexibility for counties and Extension, while establishing more specific deliverables.

Some of these suggestions can be accomplished with modest effort, but structural issues contributing to this dysfunction will be more difficult to address. These are briefly discussed in the following section.

Implications for Institutional Change Within Extension

The data suggest institutional issues worth exploring. Extension hires most faculty with specialties who then run programs in their specialty area. Writing on the subject of university engagement, McDowell (2003) states: "In many cases the situational analysis . . . that guides programming is based on long-time experience with a particular audience and is accomplished almost intuitively."

But how accurate is "intuition" when a county urbanizes or undergoes other changes that necessitate different programs requiring other specialties? WSU Extension often lacks the flexibility to respond to rapid local and regional changes due to characteristics rooted in the academic model. Whereas the on-campus locale may allow for a slow evolution of disciplines and/or departments as student demand changes, such a pace on the county level can result in programming ossification. As several commissioners noted, Extension programming often appears static or anachronistic.

Local funding becomes more critical to local offices as state support decreases. Increasing pressures on local funding increase the need for accountability, and static programming comes under closer scrutiny. Commissioners rightly ask what positive, demonstrable impact a program has on residents and their behaviors in addressing critical issues.

What happens when a faculty member's specialty does not coincide with local priorities? This currently depends almost entirely on the individual. Some will "reinvent" themselves through training or broadening their knowledge to meet the changing needs. Others continue to listen to their clientele and do what has worked for them in the past (and probably still works for them). There is little institutional incentive or assistance for faculty to make significant shifts.

Additionally, the academic evaluation system used by WSU Extension fails to reward the risk involved in reinventing oneself to meet emerging social changes. Conversely, the disincentive structure of the evaluation system is very weak, providing neither a stick nor a carrot to encourage faculty to make changes.

Often, the institution provides no coherent strategy to ensure that faculty identify and respond to these shifts in needs. Increased institutional encouragement and training could somewhat mitigate the effects. This could entail establishing a small team that deploys itself when needed to provide rapid situation assessment, followed by guidance and relevant retraining assistance. Any strategy for transitioning faculty and eliminating less relevant programs will require administrative support. Extension should better balance the long term benefits with the short term costs of such encouragement and training.

Moreover, Extension's response to other issues will remain constrained by the resources tied up in tenured agricultural faculty (Conone, 1991). Extension's tenure system contributes to and exacerbates this issue. Tenured Extension faculty members enjoy a "sinecure of position" that ably insulates them from retaliation for unpopular work as well as a "sinecure of place" that mirrors the campus version of tenure. Thus, even though WSU hiring documents state that Extension faculty are hired into the organization and not into a specific location, faculty are seldom moved. This makes the institution more family friendly, but also makes it difficult to move Extension faculty to locations where their specialties are most relevant to meet changing local and regional needs.

While morale would suffer in the short term if faculty were more mobile, morale will be no better when decreased funding eliminates positions (due in part to static or less relevant programming). Tenure sometimes insulates Extension faculty from the accountability necessary to demonstrate the relevance and impact of programs to local funders. This does not mean that tenure is not a viable system within Extension. However, it does point to the need to modify the model lifted straight from campus to better account for county realities. This requires institutional and individual leadership.

Other models exist, but most would require fundamental shifts in our Extension paradigm and may be as problematic as tenure. One such structure would entail contracting individuals to implement programming for specified terms. Bartholomew and Rinehart (1993) make the argument that "resources could be redirected rapidly from one program to another in response to . . . changing needs." Although speaking about Extension specialists, this applies equally to county-based faculty. Contract renewal would depend on whether programs still meet the priority needs of a locale.

The internal discussion and energy directed at engagement and making Extension university-wide should be better integrated into the issue of local relevance. Just as faculty at Cornell University remained disinterested in discussions on engagement (Franz, Peterson, & Randall, 2002), most WSU Extension field faculty remain largely uninvolved in on-going discussions on engagement. It is certain that commissioners pay no heed to these discussions. Making Extension stronger within will not matter if our most important local partners deem Extension irrelevant.

Fundamental changes would require philosophical shifts in what constitutes "Extension." However, as we seek ways to maintain what is valuable about Extension while increasing our ability to respond to our changing world, it behooves us to explore all alternatives in our struggle to craft such a system.

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