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## Roads Scholar Tours: A Marketing Tool for Building Strong Campus/Community Relationships

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## Roads Scholar Tours: A Marketing Tool for Building Strong Campus/Community Relationships

### Abstract

Roads Scholar Tours are a marketing tool guaranteed to build strong campus/community relationships for any land-grant university. The tours give campus-bound colleagues an opportunity to actively engage with Extension faculty and staff, volunteers, learners, and community leaders. Over the years, the tours have earned prestige through the selective nature of the invitation and the high quality experience. Scholars report 1) increased understanding of Extension's vision, mission and values, and 2) incorporation of what they learned about Extension into their campus assignments.

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## Building Campus-Community Relationships

The three-fold mission of land-grant universities presents many interesting challenges in the corporate life of the organization. One of those challenges is to create a cohesive and collaborative university community that fully includes county-based faculty and staff. Building a strong campus community requires greater knowledge and understanding of the engagement mission.

## Roads Scholar Tours Concept

That's why, at Oregon State University, the Roads Scholar Tours were developed in 1999. Seeking improved understanding of Extension's educational mission and commitment to engagement by campus leaders, the Oregon State University Extension Service initiated the tours as a way to give campus-bound colleagues firsthand experience with community-based people and programs. The tour as a marketing tool is not original to Oregon State. Several universities around the country, including The Ohio State University, Cornell University, and Washington State University, sponsor similar activities. Responding to the specific marketing problem of creating a cohesive and collaborative university community, OSU Extension put a unique spin on the concept.

## Think Strategically About Participants

Annually, potential scholars are invited by the Oregon State President and the Dean and Director of Extension to participate in a mini-van tour guided by one of the OSU Extension administrative leaders who showcases exemplary county-based programs hosted by Extension faculty. The small, intimate setting provides greater interaction with the guide and the hosts and leads to a more in-depth experience and greater learning as compared to the large bus tour hosted for new faculty by some universities. The emphasis is definitely on building relationships as the guide and scholars traverse the highways of Oregon.

The scholars interact with Extension faculty, volunteers, and learners in the community and

appreciate the various stakeholders' shared passion for OSU's land-grant mission. They observe Extension faculty teaching in community-based learning laboratories. They get to talk with the Extension faculty and staff, program participants, volunteers and community leaders and hear what a difference Extension and the University make in the lives of Oregonians.

## **Create Interesting Itineraries**

Each summer two or three appealing itineraries are designed for a limited number of scholars to choose from. The tours cover a range of challenges and opportunities for Oregon and detail how OSU Extension faculty members make a significant contribution to the communities visited. Over the years, the tours have earned prestige through the selective nature of the invitation, the limited space available, and the high quality experience.

The tours are 1 or 2 days in length. Recruitment and registration takes place in the early spring to accommodate senior-level administrators' busy calendars. Expenses generally average less than a thousand dollars per day for a tour of 10-12 participants. This includes transportation costs, meals, and lodging at state-approved rates.

## **Capitalize on Unique Community Features**

The uniqueness of the community shapes the tours. For example, on a typical tour, participants start with a brief overview of county programs delivered by the local staff chair and faculty. Next, a visit to a classroom of teen parents learning about the nutritional needs of their infants and young children will highlight the difference Extension makes in the health and well-being of families.

Traveling to a research forest for a picnic lunch, they learn about the ways Extension forestry faculty use the forest as a community-learning laboratory. Later, the travelers visit a produce farm and learn about the ways in which Extension faculty have helped its owners manage agricultural production and market the products. A stop at the 4-H Tech Wizards computer lab shows at-risk Hispanic youth teaching senior citizens how to stay in touch with their grandchildren via the Internet.

The tour finale is a four-star meal of Oregon-caught seafood hosted by the Extension Sea Grant program and prepared by a local chef. The meal becomes a tool for teaching about the impact Extension's expertise and leadership has had on the fishing industry's economic and environmental issues.

## **Include External Partners**

When possible, county commissioners and other community partners are included to demonstrate the full range of community collaboration. Throughout the day, participants are exposed to the myriad ways in which the university is engaged in local communities and in the lives of Oregonians. It is always an enlightening experience for campus-based faculty and administrators, and instills a new sense of pride and ownership for the engagement mission.

## **What Participants Tell Us**

As of summer 2004, 84 scholars have participated, with follow-up surveys reporting that participants 1) increased their understanding of Extension's vision, mission, and values, and 2) incorporated what they learned about Extension into their campus assignments. Unsolicited feedback received from participants reinforces the survey findings.

"Your tour provided those of us on campus a chance to enlarge our perspective of the Extension Service as a multi-faceted resource to the state."

OSU Head Librarian

"The tour enhanced my respect for the important work that the Extension faculty and staff perform."

OSU Foundation development officer

"The theme that I saw very strongly everywhere we stopped was the connection Extension has with the communities. That's the heart and soul of the land-grant mission."

OSU Director of Business Affairs


". . . wonderful to see the great things Extension folks are doing for our community!"

Executive Assistant to the Vice Provost

There are countless examples of how Roads Scholar Tour participants have used their increased understanding of and new appreciation for OSU Extension to improve operations that affect off-campus faculty and staff. The enhanced respect for Extension work, teamed with the mutual respect for campus-based work, has led to more collaborative efforts between Extension field faculty and campus research faculty.

## Conclusion

If campus-based faculty, staff, and administrators don't currently have a strong sense of how the Cooperative Extension Service is serving your state, you may want to consider adapting the Roads Scholar concept to fit your situation. With a minimum investment of dollars and some focused time of a few key Extension faculty and staff, the tours can happen. The priceless benefits to your organization are strengthened campus/community relationships.

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