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Supporting the Critical Administrative Leadership Role of County Directors

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Supporting the Critical Administrative Leadership Role of County Directors

Abstract

With a foot in both the university and local communities, Cooperative Extension county directors have unique opportunities to network, scan opportunities, identify assets, design and market programs, build public support, and solve problems. A survey of the administrative workload, satisfactions, and frustrations of California county directors finds these leadership roles are insufficiently supported. The data suggest the need to 1) alter merit review policies to reward community connections and networking, 2) reinvent university support bureaucracies to treat county directors as valued customers, and 3) reassert a robust vision of county-based Extension at the highest levels of the organization.

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Introduction

This article focuses on the administrative leadership role of Cooperative Extension county directors (CDs), arguing that this role is critical to a robust system of county-based Extension. As the most visible administrative presence of the university in local communities, CDs have a unique opportunity to network, scan opportunities, identify community and university assets, design and market programs, build public support, and solve problems (Bennett, 1990; Cooper & Graham, 2001; DeYoung, 1988; Fesenmaier & Contractor, 2001; Jackson & Smith, 1999). Yet this leadership potential is often thwarted by an avalanche of routine paperwork, a merit review system that rewards narrowly defined expertise, and inadequate support from university bureaucracies and leaders.

Our analysis draws on a survey of the administrative workload, satisfactions, and frustrations of University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) county directors. As of March 1, 2003, the UCCE employed 170 campus-based specialists and 263 county-based "advisors" (comparable to what some other states call county "agents"). The state's 35 million people are spread among 58 counties, typically larger in size and population and more diverse demographically and ecologically than counties in most other states. As a result, there is considerable variation in the role and functions of local UCCE offices and in the degree to which they have supportive relationships with local government officials.

About one-fifth of California's 263 advisors serve as county directors. These 49 county directors are the point persons for all internal administrative processes, and they are the most visible point of contact between the land grant university and the local community. They play a central role in the staff merit review process and bear ultimate responsibility for UCCE programs in the county. Some responsibilities fall to CDs by default--for example, when there are staff vacancies and essential programs must be maintained. Overall, the CD performs a complex set of managerial functions and faces pressures and demands similar to other county government department heads or executive directors of community-based nonprofit agencies.

Three structural obstacles make it difficult for UCCE county directors to flourish as administrative leaders. First, as academic employees, county directors are primarily evaluated according to criteria that emphasize their research and outreach education roles rather than their administrative leadership contributions (Weiser, 1997). This reward system persists despite the essential role that county directors play in local issues, state and federal accountability, program and staff development, and fulfillment of administrative mandates.

Second, CDs are situated at the nexus of two separate administrative systems--one tied to county government and one to the university. As a result, they have reporting responsibilities in two different chains of command, each with its own rules, definitions, procedures, and working arrangements. For example, California county directors must supervise both university-paid and county-paid personnel, under two distinct sets of personnel policies and procedures.

Third, despite these complex demands and responsibilities, county directors typically come to the role with little or no previous administrative experience, having been hired based on their academic and programmatic expertise. Thrust into their administrative roles with minimal orientation and very little ongoing support and training, county directors often must "learn by doing"--coping with their duties on their own as issues arise.

The survey data reveal many frustrations associated with these realities, but also the tremendous satisfaction county directors derive from their local connections. The data supports altering both the reward system and internal administrative practices to better support the community leadership provided by county directors. Such reforms are particularly warranted given the need to build public support for Extension budgets, a prospect enhanced when Extension practice embodies the historic ideal of the "engaged university" (Boyer, 1996; Brown & Witte, 2000; Ehrlich, 1999; Jackson & Smith, 1999; Kellogg Commission, 1999; Matthews, 1999; Peters, 1996).

Methods

We included *all* UCCE county directors (N=49) in a "fax and phone" survey conducted between April 1 and May 30, 2002. CDs were asked to base their responses on the 2001 calendar year. As such, the data represent a snapshot of county director workloads and concerns at one period in time, from 49 perspectives.

The survey procedure was to schedule a phone interview with the county director and then to fax a survey form in advance of the scheduled interview. On average, interviews lasted just under 1 hour. Four Cooperative Extension Specialists in Community Development at UC Davis conducted the interviews. Each interview was tape recorded so that responses to open-ended questions could be transcribed, coded, and analyzed.

Profile of County Directors Surveyed

The 49 county directors surveyed are a veteran group. They work long hours and spend more than half of that time on administrative duties. Average tenure in Cooperative Extension is 20 years (range is 6 months to 37 years), with only seven having been in the organization for 10 years or fewer. Average tenure as a CD in their current county is 7 years (range is 2 months to 23 years), with about half of CDs having served for fewer than 5 years.

Table 1.
Tenure as County Director and in UCCE (N=49)

Tenure	As County Director	In UCCE
< 1 year	7 (14.3%)	2 (4.1%)
1-3 years	16 (32.6%)	0 (0.0%)
5-10 years	15 (30.7%)	5 (10.2%)
> 10 years	11 (22.4%)	42 (85.7%)

Forty-one CDs are considered county department heads, meaning they have formal reporting and supervisory responsibilities within county government, attend regular county department head meetings, and are assigned related duties. About half of CDs (24) hold indefinite appointments; 20 have 3-year renewable appointments, and one has a 5-year renewable appointment (the other four in the sample included three interim CDs and one recently retired CD).

UCCE provides annual administrative stipends to county directors ranging from \$2,000 to \$7,500; two-thirds of the stipends are for \$4,000 or less. These stipends form only a very small part of the overall salary packages for CDs, which range from \$46,700 to \$115,300.

Administrative Workloads

The number of reported hours worked per week ranged from 40-75, with about two-thirds of all CDs exceeding 50 hours per week. On average, the 49 CDs spend 60% of their time on administrative duties and 40% on programmatic responsibilities. A majority (60.9%) of CDs spent more time on administration than specified in the job description, and one-third (N=16) spent substantially more (15-45%) of their time on administration than indicated in the job description (Table 2).

Table 2.
Actual Time Spent on Administration vs. Position Description (N=46)

% actual time compared to position description	# of CDs	% of CDs
15-45% greater	16	34.8%
<15% greater	12	26.1%
the same	14	30.4%
Less than position description	4	8.7%

There is considerable variation in the number of academic and non-academic employees supervised by different county directors. On average, county offices have 5 county-paid and 14 university-paid employees, and CDs directly supervise 5 academic staff and 9 non-academic staff.

Table 3.
Number of Employees Supervised

Statistic	Total Employees		Employees Supervised	
	County-paid	University-paid	Academic staff supervised	Non-academic staff supervised
Mean	5.1	14.3	4.8	9.2
Median	4	12	4	5
Minimum	0	1	0	1
Maximum	18	81	14	75

The need to secure grants for research and outreach programs is a fact of life for all UCCE academics, and tight university budgets exacerbate this part of the county director workload. Indeed, the fact that county directors and other UCCE staff can leverage their university

connections to secure extramural grant funding for projects of local significance is an important role for county offices.

University records revealed that the average UCCE county office had 12 grants or contracts (range 0 to 37) in May 2002. Half of the counties have nine or more grants or contracts, and a quarter of the counties have 16 or more grants or contracts. The dollar value of these account balances averages \$237,802 per county (range is \$3,918 to \$804,207). As a point of comparison, the average UCCE county office budget (from university and county allocations combined) in 2001 was \$721,661.

Overall, CDs estimate that they spent considerably more time on university requirements (63%) than on county requirements (37%). We presented each CD with a list of major categories of administrative functions and asked them to rate how time consuming each is. The list included personnel, financial, program reporting, compliance, meetings, facilities and equipment, risk management, and public relations (including generating support).

We also asked which responsibilities had increased significantly in the past 5-10 years. The most time-consuming aspects of the CD job include university personnel procedures, risk management requirements, and meeting demands. Increases in administrative responsibilities over the past 5-10 years are attributed to new university demands rather than to county requirements (Table 4).

Table 4.
Top Reasons for Increases in Administrative Workloads (in descending order by frequency of mention)

Reason	# of CDs who mentioned
More (and more time-consuming) university procedures	21
Volunteer fingerprinting and background checks	20
Time required for processing more grants, gifts, etc. through UC	15
Change in size of staff	15
Greater focus on risk management by the university	12

Local Connections and Their Benefits to UCCE

We asked CDs about the types of agencies and organizations with which they had regular or significant interaction during 2001 and the benefits to UCCE of developing these organizational connections (Tables 5 & 6). Many CDs cited this element as the most satisfying aspect of their work.

- "Work with community organizations provides endless venues to address/resolve problems that provide tremendous local recognition. It is the glue that holds everything together for CE."
- "Other county departments request information from us on a fairly regular basis, technical information, and then we occasionally develop programs together. So we'll work together on demonstration projects or on public workshops, and we'll co-sponsor and have presentations from people in those departments and ourselves. That strengthens our budget requests to the Board of Supervisors."

Table 5.
Significant Connections with County Government and Community Based Organizations (by frequency for those with 10 or more mentions)

County Government	N	Community Organizations	N
Individual department heads	27	Farm Bureau	36

Ag Commissioner	25	Natural resource groups	19
Board of Supervisors, collectively	16	Local ag-related groups	14
Individual supervisors	16	School districts	10
County commissions and committees	15	USDA Agencies	10
County Administrative Office	13		

Table 6.

Benefits to UCCE of Community Connections (those with 10 or more mentions by frequency of mention)

Benefit	N
Increasing county support for UCCE, including but not limited to fiscal	34
Increasing visibility of UCCE/UC resources	20
Developing good working relationships	20
Marketing UCCE services	16
Generating public support for UCCE	16
Keeping up to date with local issues	13
Enhancing collaboration and resource sharing	12
Creating connections for the future	11

Satisfactions and Frustrations

The survey revealed a consistent pattern: satisfactions tend to be associated with county-related aspects of administrative work, and frustrations tend to be associated with university-related work (Table 7 & 8). As one CD stated:

- "Generally speaking, a county director is not appreciated in academic life. On the other hand, I am valued as a department head in the county."

CDs are most likely to find satisfaction by increasing the visibility and support for county programs, developing a happy and productive staff, and solving local problems. We heard many comments like the following.

- "When we're actually dealing with programmatic efforts and helping the people within our program do good things, being able to provide them with the resources and give them some guidance on where to go and how to access information or resources or to make the connection with others, it's very satisfying."
- "The ability to create programs or projects or being able to initiate and to create--to serve our

customers--that is especially satisfying to me. To work with the community on complex issues; I especially enjoy that."

Table 7.
Administrative Satisfactions Experienced by County Directors (in descending order by categories most frequently mentioned)

Category of Satisfaction	Number of Responses
Obtaining and managing resources (money, positions) to support county programs	18
Happy staff (morale, advisors able to do their job)	16
Staff development (team building, training new staff, mentoring, developing new training program)	13
Enhanced visibility & recognition (from public and UCCE--includes program & personal)	11
Solving problems (routine and special)	11
Ability to choose, develop, & manage new programs	9
Collaboration with other county departments	8
Autonomy, flexibility, ability to act quickly	6
Professional growth	5
Variety in the nature of the work	4
Interaction with other county departments	2
Other (e.g., defining needs, ability to keep projects going, synergy, applying theory, etc.)	18

Of the 49 CDs surveyed, 36 (74%) mentioned one or more university-related concerns as a source of frustration. The comments emphasized the counterproductive nature of many university procedures and rules, which work against programmatic effectiveness and add burdens to workloads of CDs. CDs also lamented a lack of understanding by university administrators of the work occurring in the front lines of the organization.

Table 8.
Administrative Frustrations Mentioned by County Directors (in descending order by categories most frequently mentioned)

Category of Frustration	Number of Responses
University red tape & bureaucracy (inconsistency, no implementation guidelines, shows lack of understanding of how county programs operate, too many steps in accounting procedures, etc.)	24

Personnel issues (problem people, staff conflict, lack of HR training, staff turnover, etc.)	16
University selection & hiring process (includes getting new positions)	10
Not enough time for professional/programmatic work	9
Unreasonable university deadlines	8
CD salary/stipend not commensurate with job demands	8
Meeting demands (especially travel time involved, being away from programmatic responsibility)	8
Risk management (as continuous struggle)	7
Ineffectual regional staff (includes devolution of responsibilities to counties from regions)	6
4-H problems (squabbles, fingerprinting, accounting, etc.)	5
Budget issues (getting what we need, budget hoops, getting statewide support, etc.)	5
Reporting (work group reports, CASA reports, too much, etc.)	4
Administrative skills not valued in university merit & promotion system	4
Other (one time mentions)	27

Asked to suggest changes that would support their administrative roles, CDs offered comments such as these.

- "We've got a process that is so bureaucratic and bogged down, even though we have new monies to hire people, and we approve those positions, we can't get people on board."
- "We're constantly getting put in positions where upper administration comes up with these policies that aren't even discussed with us and then we have to force them down everybody's throat and be the messengers for this stuff. And if they would kind of get some buy-in a little earlier, that would be helpful."
- "The major departments--risk management, personnel, contracts and grants--somehow need to work as a unit, so that when something comes down to us, we've answered all those questions in one document and we're not having to answer those same questions for three different areas, or three different people."
- "We've gotten away from emphasis on customer service and program development and program leadership, to be much more in a regulatory mode, for instance, the background checks [for 4-H volunteers]. Now, 90% of the talk in county directors' meetings is about regulation, rather than how can we better serve clientele."

CDs expressed particular frustration with the lack of recognition of their administrative work in the merit and review process

- "County directors are not faring very well in advancement because of the fact that administration is not included as a criterion."

The widely shared perception is that programmatic accomplishments are the driving force of the institutional reward system and that managerial and administrative leadership tasks are not valued and important in their own right.

- "I think they sort of see us as administrative mules to get paperwork done and to keep things flowing, but they don't use us quite as they could. Politically, we could be of great value, in terms of helping the university build support among our local representatives. Yet they never look to us for that kind of support."

Conclusion and Implications

California's Cooperative Extension county directors make broad and deep county and community connections and are well positioned as the local "eyes and ears" of the university. The CDs we surveyed consistently report that community networking is the most meaningful and valuable part of their job, which otherwise is dominated by an overabundance of routine paperwork and hassles with university bureaucracies.

Despite their evident frustration, our respondents still believe deeply in the county-based vision of Cooperative Extension, because they see how it can and often does work to the benefit of both the community and the university. Yet the findings also suggest the perception of a pervasive disconnect between the realities of this county-level Extension work with its everyday pressures on the one hand, and the career incentives facing county directors on the other.

While the job of county director necessarily involves a good deal of paperwork--including managing the paper flow for leave records, in-service training funds, travel advances, reimbursements, etc -- it is more appropriately seen as a position of significant administrative and community leadership. The burden of this leadership is to mediate the demands and coordinate the assets of the three "masters" of local UCCE offices--the university, county government, and the public itself. The importance of county-level administrative leadership was previously underscored in an internal UCCE task force report (Smith Committee Report, August 1997, p.4):

Administration is often viewed narrowly in paperwork requirements without due consideration to the human aspects of administration, which, if lacking, hinders teamwork, trust building, joint governance, and programmatic/administrative planning. A staff member has a two-part investment in the organization: first, to deliver the program and/or services they were hired to do and secondly, to contribute to the maintenance and long-term success of the organization. Without a healthy organization, there are no effective programs. Staffing in a county to provide for effective relationships with county government is essential to the furtherance of Cooperative Extension.

What can be done to better support the critical administrative leadership role of county directors? Our analysis suggests three organizational change strategies that merit greater attention in state Extension systems.

Altering Behavior by Changing CD Incentives and Rewards

To be willing to invest the requisite time networking, identifying community assets, educating the public, and solving local problems, CDs need to know they will not be penalized in the merit and review process. The current system places weight primarily on narrowly academic criteria rather than administrative achievements or community leadership. The survey evidence indicates that this weighting is counter to how CDs actually spend their time and what parts of their work they perceive to be the most valuable. In light of this, California and possibly other state Extension systems should begin examining how to give more weight to administrative leadership in the merit and review process.

In addition to this central point, the CDs we surveyed suggest a number of other reforms that would make their jobs more attractive and fulfilling.

- One is to adjust the level of administrative stipends currently available to CDs to reflect more adequately the nature of their responsibilities.
- A second is to ease the workload on CDs by providing them with university-paid staff assistants.
- A third is to provide proactive training and support that make it more likely that county directors can succeed in their varied roles.

The overall goal should be to provide a sufficient incentive for attracting and retaining CDs who are gifted managerial and administrative leaders and who like performing the various roles this entails.

Reinventing Internal Support Bureaucracies

The data point to the need to reinvent the relationship between university bureaucracies with responsibility for key support functions (accounting, grants and contracts, personnel, risk management) and the county directors and other front-line staff who directly interact with the public. In business terms, the customers of the university's bureaucratic services (i.e., the CDs) are

not being provided with needed support services in a timely, efficient, and effective manner--interfering with their ability to serve community constituencies. The basic concept guiding the needed reform is that the university's bureaucratic service providers should be held accountable to their customers within the organization.

According to the survey data, the current relationship works just the opposite. County directors spend much of their time serving the paperwork needs and schedules of university bureaucrats--who in effect become additional customers that the CDs must serve. Reversing the polarity in this relationship is of course not simple or easy, but in bureaucracies that have succeeded the public benefits are substantial (see Barzelay, 1992, for many examples).

Two concrete steps can be taken to move in the needed direction.

- First, develop a process by which internal service bureaucracies and their procedures can be continually evaluated, and see to it that county directors are significantly represented in that process.
- Second, evaluate support bureaucracies based on the results they achieve for county directors or other internal customers rather than simply on how correctly they apply standard procedures.

Renewing the Vision for County-Based Cooperative Extension

The final change strategy suggested by the survey data is for senior organizational leaders to articulate and actively support a compelling vision for county-based Cooperative Extension. The presence of a university connection in multiple communities across the state and the educational organizing and delivery system that animates this infrastructure are an invaluable public resource. To animate and activate this resource, the administrative leadership of county directors must be clearly recognized and amply supported by university leaders.

The county directors surveyed describe the enormous potential in Cooperative Extension's county-based infrastructure, but feel their local work is currently under-appreciated and often misunderstood by leaders in the organization.

- "I think there's an overarching feeling of decreasing commitment to the concept of the local-based Cooperative Extension programming."
- "The lack of appreciation and understanding of what wonderful things we *can* do and *do* do at the county level is very frustrating to me."
- "I guess the first change I would really like to see is for management personnel to take time to learn about county programs and people and quit reinventing or fixing an organization before they know what it's about."

County directors identified a number of specific steps that organizational leaders could take to better support their local work. These included:

- Spending more time in the field learning about what county offices are doing;
- Promoting Cooperative Extension by attending the meetings of statewide organizations that represent county and local governments;
- Placing higher priority on customer service and relationships with county partners;
- Articulating local agendas and concerns at the highest levels of the university, so that they are better represented on the research agenda.

While not easy, none of these steps is beyond the reach of Cooperative Extension leaders. The question is whether they will be seized as priorities and pursued with vigor.

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