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Is Extension an Idea Whose Time Has Come—and Gone?

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Abstract

Extension and its funding are in deep trouble all across the country. Some influences on our situation are in the society and beyond Extension's control. Other influences are within Extension's control and include broadening our support base, controlling our own self-destructive behavior, making sure we are knowledge based, and collecting institutionally for the good things we do. If we cannot accomplish these we may be an organization whose time has come--and gone.

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Our Funding Crisis--Just a Sign of the Times or More?

Extension is in crisis--still and ongoing. It has been this way for quite a long time. I wrote my paper "Extension Revisited or If You Haven't Visited Extension Recently You'd Better Do It Soon Cause It Isn't Going Be There Long" in 1991. The system was under assault then and still is.

The federal partner is almost not a partner anymore--the constant decline of formula funding and the loss of national Extension program leaders is just some of the evidence. State governments in fiscal crisis all across the nation are questioning their support to Extension. In November 2003 Michigan State University issued an e-mail appeal to alumni to make noise wherever they could--both Extension and the Experiment Station were on the chopping block--not just for cuts but for possible elimination. Identifying a state where there is not a state funding crisis for Extension is difficult. There are tales about North Carolina, South Carolina, Minnesota, and Oregon. And what about Massachusetts? Oh, they simply tried to eliminate 4-H there.

How can we fathom all this negative stuff about a part of public higher education in America in which many of us believe so deeply? We do believe that the land-grant universities changed higher education in the world forever. We do believe that Extension is what made these universities better than Harvard and Yale under the values of American society. Extension engaged the land-grant universities with the ordinary people of the society before anyone knew what engagement was all about.

Extension has and does make some of the scholarship in the land-grant universities better and more relevant than it would otherwise be because it solves real problems of real people. Our heritage is proud--even great! Those who came before us transformed a peasant agriculture into the most productive agriculture in the world. At the same time the land-grant universities created and institutionalized much of modern science--just examine the history of statistics.

So what has gone wrong? Why has our support from the society (the national, state, and local partners of the "Cooperative" part of Extension) dropped off so badly? Is it just another paradox of the times? "I'm proud to be an American, but I really don't want to pay taxes (for anything, even the things that make me proud)."

Are our problems of support just another part of the failure of many Americans to understand ourselves and our own society? Consider--according to a Time survey, during the 2000 election 19% of Americans, when asked, believed they were in the top 1% of the income distribution. Another 20% thought they would soon be. (Brooks, 2003) It's hard to believe this need for a reality

check is explained by believing in and hoping for the American dream.

Both the "hell bent on cutting taxes" and the "don't really understand who we are" phenomena are outside of our control. They are forces to which we can only react. Both may be involved when folks exclaim that Extension is the one of the best-kept secrets around. But if our time has come and gone, what would that mean? It would seem to mean that what we offer and/or the methods we use to deliver what we offer are no longer relevant to most of the people in the society.

We Have Met the Enemy--It Is Us!

Of the alternative explanations for the demise of support for Extension--irrational behavior, failure by audiences to understand or appreciate our value, or irrelevant and inappropriately delivered programs--I believe the major causes are in the latter two categories. Unfortunately, the irrational behavior most affecting Extension is internal to Extension itself.

The need to broaden the Extension program portfolio to other than agricultural audiences while continuing to serve well our traditional support base seems obvious. What is less obvious is the need for both agricultural audiences and agricultural Extension staff to understand the importance they play in the survival of the organization. If either agricultural audiences or agricultural Extension agents use the substantial power they have in the system to protect *just* the agricultural Extension part of the budget, they are contributing to the more rapid demise of the system. And there won't even be a Galaxy in which to decline to participate.

The argument goes this way: Extension must broaden its base of support. Almost everyone in the system agrees. Broadening our support base means finding ways to serve and collect from new audiences. With agricultural audiences declining in numbers and power, we must find ways of serving agriculture well with fewer resources. If agricultural clients and agents insist on maintaining old ways of delivering programs and protect only the agricultural part of the budget, they put the system in a budget/political downward spiral towards its ultimate demise. When agricultural agents participate in trying to restrict spending in Extension to agricultural programs, their irrational, self-interested behavior costs Extension dearly.

Actually, the casual evidence is that agricultural interests inside and outside Extension are a little more sophisticated than believing they can carry even the agricultural budget for themselves by themselves. Most agricultural groups do recognize the role that 4-H programming support plays in the total politics of Extension budgets. When in recent years Minnesota agricultural agents went after restricting the Extension portfolio to a subset of current programming, they were careful to include 4-H. They knew, as do we all, that in most states 4-H carries more political water than any other part of the program. Curiously, we invest the least and have the thinnest research base in support of 4-H programming. (See also Astroth, 2003.)

As important as support from agricultural audiences is for our total programs, other parts of the program must become much more sophisticated in collecting support for the excellent programs they do. We allow ourselves to be defeated by continuing to deliver good programs to appreciative audiences who never make known the value they place on our programs. We should never be permitted ever again to say that "Extension is the best-kept secret around" if we are a part of keeping it secret by not working hard to collect for the institution from the people we serve.

There is, however, a nuance in the preceding sentence. It says "collect for the institution." Lots of Extension staff collect credit for the excellent work they do, but they collect for themselves rather than for the institution of Extension. That stored up personal political capital usually gets spent on reallocation within the organization to protect "my" programs rather than on growing the total.

Revealing the Secrets and Getting Credit for It

One way to think about generating and garnering support for our Extension programs is to consider that the following four conditions are necessary to that process:

1. Programs must generate a positive net-benefit to the client;
2. Clients must attribute the benefits they gained to Extension;
3. To solicit and collect support from clients who have benefited requires that we be able to identify and communicate with them; and
4. The costs to clients of acting politically for us must be less than the value they place on present and anticipated program benefits. (For more detail on this way of thinking about Extension programming, see McDowell, 1985.)

These four conditions mean 1) we must have first-rate programs that really meet audience needs; 2) audiences must know the information came from Extension; 3) we must have mechanisms in place to identify and contact clients like associations, clubs, newsletters, mailing lists, and/or other devices; and 4) when we need to collect support, we must make it easy and cheap for our supporters to help us. These conditions focus on both the public and private benefits that our audiences gain from our programs. Explicitly identifying the public benefits would help clients

identify their own benefits and also stimulate them to act politically for us because they see a broader public interest in our work. (See Kalambokidis, 2004.)

Our history and the discussions of engagement make clear that efficiency arguments about the organization and delivery of Extension programs substantially understate the role of Extension in the university. (See Laband & Lentz, 2004.) Such analyses, while instructive, focus primarily on the direct beneficiaries of Extension programs. They substantially overlook Extension's role in making research better and more relevant. They ignore the role of Extension in eliciting broad public support for the university beyond the parents of students, who are after all at any point in time, some of the primary beneficiaries of our universities. In economists' terms, they use a production economics approach when a public choice or political economy approach is more appropriate.

An Idea Whose Time Has Gone?

To finally answer the question about whether Extension's time has come and gone, we must return to the question of the Extension program agenda. Some of the issues we must deal with about that agenda are the following.

- If we are seeking to address a problem through functional education, then part of the impact must deal with our coverage of the problem. That is, we must ask what proportion of the affected audience is being reached. We use insect scouts to track infestations of pests so that our advice to farmers will be proportional to the threat. We seldom ask what proportion of youth, whether at risk or not, we are serving and measure our success in those terms. And then there is all we know about nutrition and the obesity epidemic. Dr. Phil appears to have more advice on obesity than all of our land-grant universities.
- If we say we are "knowledge based," we must be knowledge based! The gap and barriers between campus academic departments and field educators must be overcome. For example, notwithstanding Kirk Astroth's *JOE* comments about scholarship in 4-H and youth programming (2004), we must have serious, heavy duty, honest-to-god research being done on behalf of our Extension programming with kids. Serious youth development research will involve departments of sociology, psychology, family development, and many others. While youth and 4-H staff must also behave in scholarly ways, they are not doing the research we need. Just their scholarship is not enough!

Extension directors, much less field staff, tend not to address the campus/field gap issue because faculty in academic departments do not "direct" easily--they never will direct easily. The campus/field gap becomes an additional barrier to broadening the program portfolio, particularly when the departments that need to be involved have no Extension traditions or experience. Bridging this gap between the campus and the field is explicitly about the "positive net benefit condition" identified above. The gap, and the failure to bridge it across the whole university, may ultimately prove that Extension's time has indeed come--and gone.

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