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What Is Old Is New Again: Cooperative Extension's Role in Democracy Building Through Civic Engagement

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Abstract

The early history of the Cooperative Extension Service is rich with examples of the agent's role in building democracy among the citizenry of a young nation. However, the cold war shifted the focus of the public university toward the practice of one-way dissemination of research-based knowledge from the professor to the farmer and homemaker. As public funding continues to diminish for higher education, self-reflection suggests that Extension return to its original focus of building democracy through civic engagement. Suggestions for practice include valuing local knowledge and empowering citizens to solve their problems through action research projects.

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Introduction

Democracy building was a cornerstone of higher education when its founders created the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890. The land-grant university was poised to become the great equalizer of an aristocratic society by educating the commonwealth. The Cold War is credited with fundamentally changing the mission of the university from developing democratic citizens to attaining technological superiority (Checkoway, 2001; Mathews, 1997). Faculty were no longer valued for educating the masses in the virtues of a democratic society. Basic research activities rose in stature to dominate the modern university.

Faculty members were forced to change their role from service to science (Rice, 1991). The noble cause of generating knowledge to solve societal problems was replaced by research agendas that would lead to a peer-reviewed journal article, which became the gold standard of success for faculty regardless of the fact that knowledge disseminated through this route is not accessible to the majority of society.

Critics charge that the university does not prepare adults for a place at the democratic table (Boyte & Hollander, 1999; Checkoway, 2001). Academic disciplines focus on teaching specific content to students in the hope that after a 4-year curriculum the student will graduate a competent member of the profession, not necessarily a civically engaged or democratically minded citizen. Civic lessons are left for others to teach.

The classroom is not the only domain criticized for failing to fully educate America's youth. Research and Extension activities conducted at the university have fallen under attack for not targeting more immediate needs of society. Common problems encountered by county educators are viewed as unpublishable by faculty who must be on the cutting edge of their discipline to earn promotion and tenure (Kelsey, Pense, & Mariger, 2002).

What Is the Role of the Land-Grant University in Teaching Civic Engagement?

The land-grant university has the power to set the tone for higher education worldwide through its prominent status. The land-grant university was established for the commonwealth and embodied the democratic ideals of a Jeffersonian society. The Cooperative Extension System (Extension), founded in 1914 by the Smith-Lever Act, was designed to forge a connection between work,

education, and citizenship (Peters, 1997). Extension saw itself as building rural democracy and developing community capacity through organizational activities (Boyte & Hollander, 1999; Peters, 2002).

The mission of the CSREES is "To advance knowledge for agriculture, the environment, human health and well being, and communities" (http://www.reeusda.gov/1700/about/about_csrees.htm). Extension has become the largest rural adult education agency in the world for building excellence in agricultural production and homemaking skills. It has recently expanded its work to include youth at risk and community development programs.

Extension is in an optimal position to help the university reengage with communities through their army of service providers who can act as catalysts for public work. In fact, public work was the dominant driving force of the early Extension county educator. Peters (1997, p. 52-53), citing the work of Smith and Wilson (1930), described the county educator as one who brought "rural people together in groups for social intercourse and study, solving community and neighborhood problems, fostering better relations and common endeavor between town and country." Smith and Wilson presented the idea that farmers and faculty were equal brokers of knowledge, each having something to learn from the other, and that it was the county educators' role to transfer knowledge from both parties for mutual growth and development of a nation.

However, in recent times Extension has come under fire for failing to remember its roots of building active citizenship through the development of human capital that is empowered and socially engaged. Over the past 40 years Extension agents moved away from the role of community organizer toward promoting the research agenda of the university, with little regard for local knowledge (Peters, 2002). Extension agents saw their role as delivering knowledge from the research professor to farmers in a limited array of disciplines, not as facilitators of knowledge exchange between the groups. One of the early scholars of the land-grant system, Liberty Hyde Bailey (1858-1954), stated in 1915:

It is not sufficient to train technically in the trades and crafts and arts to the end of securing greater economic efficiency-this may be accomplished in a despotism and result in no self-action on the part of the people. Every democracy must reach far beyond what is commonly known as economic efficiency, and do everything it can to enable those in the backgrounds to maintain their standing and their pride and to partake in the making of political affairs (cited in Peters, 1997, p. 52).

Bailey's words remind us that higher education should not be solely about developing economic opportunities for its graduates, but rather about the business of developing graduates who are fully prepared to participate in society in economic, social, and political dimensions.

How Can Extension Educators Build Democracy Through Civic Engagement?

Citizens must have ethical standards, social responsibility, and civic competencies in a democratic society. Citizens must "understand their own social identities, communicate with those who are different from themselves, and build bridges across differences for a common cause" (Checkoway, 2001, p. 129).

Extension educators can teach democratic values through civic engagement as a lifestyle. When we speak of teaching a lifestyle it means incorporating the values of democracy and diversity in daily lessons that are focused on problem-centered rather than discipline-based learning (Checkoway, 2001).

The Wingspread Declaration on Renewing the Civic Mission of the American Research University (Boyte & Hollander, 1999) set forth several challenges for filling Americans with the spirit of democracy. Chief among these recommendations is to get communities involved in projects that are meaningful and that make a positive difference in people's lives.

Participants should be immersed in a climate that is rich in difference--race, culture, ideologies, and experiences. Extension educators should help to create opportunities for the immersion experiences of participants by identifying situations where they can work with community members in solving problems. Prins and Ewert (2002) discuss Extension's role in cooperating with faith-based organizations as a way to build social capital.

Extension educators must also be willing to engage in equal partnerships with the community and respect different ways of knowing. In return, the university must support and reward such activities by making itself more porous to difference, more interactive with non-academic life, and more effective in communicating with lay audiences.

Reengaging the Community

Reconceptualizing scholarship at the university is a required first step in redirecting the university back toward the community. It is common practice to regard community members as human subjects and to view their problems dispassionately through values-free positivist lenses. Researchers must shift their thinking and practice toward post-positivism values and regard members of the community as full "partners and active participants in knowledge development" if they are to be successful in reengaging the community (Checkoway, 2001, p. 134).

Collaborative, post-positivist, community-based projects are reemerging across America. The Wisconsin Cooperative Extension Service founded the Teen Assessment Project in the last 1980s for the purpose of conducting action research in collaboration with university faculty and Extension agents to better understand the needs of adolescents in local communities (Peters, 1997). Community members gathered with faculty to co-create a survey that answered questions that were important to citizens. The data was collected, analyzed, and disseminated by the team. Local knowledge was used to address local problems. This process empowered citizens and gave faculty meaningful work that contributed to their tenure and promotion goals.

The Cornell Cooperative Extension changed its motto in 1996 to reflect a changing paradigm that acknowledges partnerships between university-generated and local knowledge. The motto is "The Cornell Cooperative Extension educational system enables people to improve their lives and communities through partnerships that put experience and research to work" (Warner, Hinrichs, Schneyer, & Joyce, 1998). The Cornell Participatory Action Network (CPARN) based at Cornell University and the Cornell Community and Rural Development Institute (CaRDI) (<http://www.cardi.cornell.edu/index.cfm>) also focus on community problems and solutions through action research practices. Community members partner with university faculty to collect and analyze information for the purpose of social justice and sustainability.

Conclusion

In order to facilitate greater civic engagement, a space must be created that allows for practical wisdom to flourish, for the valuing of folk knowledge as a legitimate form of knowing, and for conducting research *with* the people, not just *for* the people. The Cooperative Extension Service has deep roots in facilitating this endeavor, but was misdirected by the Cold War. With globalization and a world community epistemology at hand, the time has come for Extension to reengage with communities to build partnerships that truly reflect the spirit of solidarity that the land-grant university was founded upon.

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