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Identifying, Developing, and Marketing Library Services to Cooperative Extension Personnel

Cooperative Extension personnel are responsible for disseminating information of university-based research to the people of their state. At Utah State University, there were no library services in place to assist this population in meeting the demands for information. Extension personnel were surveyed to identify useful library services, and the results were used to develop and market library services.

The land-grant university system was initiated by the Morrill Acts of 1862/1890 and expanded by the Smith-Lever Act of 1914. As a result of these acts of Congress, land-grant universities and colleges, including Utah State University (USU), have as their mission three goals: research, education, and service. The Smith-Lever Act also established the Cooperative Extension System to exist in conjunction with land-grant universities. The purpose of this national system, which consists of three partners—the United States Department of Agriculture, state land-grant institutions, and local agencies at the city and county levels—is to bring practical and useful applications of university research to the people throughout each state.¹ This is accomplished at the local level through the work of Cooperative Extension agents stationed in nearly every county within the state.

Utah State University is somewhat unique among land-grant universities in its organization of Utah's Cooperative Extension Service. In 1970, the university combined its traditional Cooperative Extension program with the academic programs and services of its eight colleges and departments, preparing university extension to provide a broader range of informational services beyond those in agriculture, natural resources, and family life. A 1995 survey of 1,678 Utah residents and 70 Utah legislators conducted by Extension Services indicated the need for extension's primary responsibility to shift. Traditionally, extension's role was the dissemination of information in areas such as agriculture and family life but should now include the dissemina-

tion of information in new areas such as urban growth and development, education, taxes, gangs, and crime as well. As communities experience changing needs for information, extension agents are required to serve different audiences and provide services in new ways.

Providing the public with access to information is a function shared by both Cooperative Extension Service and the land-grant-based academic library. The library's role, despite the changing nature of information storage, retrieval, and delivery, remains to collect, preserve, and provide access to information on a wide range of subjects. Similarly, the role of Extension Service, which has been experiencing changes comparable to libraries, calls for it to provide access to information through making the practical application of university-based research and knowledge accessible to the citizens of every state. Extension is exploring new channels of delivery as Rasmussen discusses in *Taking the University to the People: Seventy-five Years of Cooperative Extension*:

Extension should adopt program delivery systems that will enable it to act as the resource base for disseminating applied research, reaching a wide range

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of new and present audiences, and extending its educational programs beyond traditional spheres. Extension must act decisively to maintain its role as the arm of the land-grant university providing research-based knowledge and educational programs having a positive impact on issues affecting agriculture, communities, families, and youth. It must move beyond service to the traditional agricultural producers, homemakers clubs, and 4-H clubs to become a recognized program developer and valued educational resource for organizations, agencies, and localities as well as for its traditional clientele.²

Meeting these demands for new types of information and new systems of delivery is a challenge currently facing extension personnel and is an opportunity for the university land-grant library to identify and develop types of services and programs that would benefit extension personnel in meeting their challenges.

Statement of Problem

The USU Library has no specific outreach programs designed to facilitate information access by the Cooperative Extension personnel, many of whom are in remote areas of the state. Recently, an informal survey of librarians at USU demonstrated this by reporting a complete lack of awareness of library use by any Extension Service personnel.

A literature review revealed few studies addressing library use by Cooperative Extension. Shih and Evans' study "Where Field Staff Get Information" and the Burns study *The Elements of Access to Agricultural Sciences Information* showed extension agents rarely consulted or considered using the library as an information resource.³ With the diverse information requirements extension agents are expected to carry out, it is surprising that the library has not traditionally been one of their more useful resources.

Delivery of library services to remote areas has been difficult in the past. The introduction of new telecommunication technologies into libraries and cooperative extension offices creates the potential to implement a new model of library services to this segment of the university population. Since library services are no longer physically bound to the library's location, new avenues for information dissemination ought to be possible. For these information delivery services to be effective, it is critical that librarians ascertain user needs and then build upon this knowledge. Librarians must assume an active role to understand the client's needs and be-

gin successful development of information access and delivery systems that meet these needs.

The combination of these factors indicates an obvious need to examine the information and library use patterns of extension personnel. This examination is necessary to identify, develop, and market library services that would assist extension personnel in fulfilling their role of disseminating the research-based knowledge of the land-grant institution to the people of the state.

Survey Methods

A survey was developed to determine directions for future library programs aimed at Extension Services and the type of training that would be required to implement these programs. The survey sought to identify extension agents' preferences for communication and information use, as well as to evaluate the levels of expertise extension personnel had with library technology currently available. Specifically, technological advances included: access to the library's OPAC and journal databases, awareness of and access to the Internet, the World Wide Web (WWW), and e-mail. The information gained would be used to apply existing and emergent technologies in innovative ways to deliver library services to extension agents.

The following questions were used to guide the development of the questionnaire:

1. What existing library services/resources would most benefit (or are most needed by) extension personnel in Utah and in each district within the state?
2. What library services/resources are most used by extension personnel?
3. What library services/resources are most valued by extension personnel?
4. What library services/resources, which are not currently available, do extension personnel need?
5. How accessible is needed information to extension personnel?
6. What type of library services training do extension personnel feel is most needed?

The questions were formulated based on the information sought by the Utah State University librarians. A draft of the questionnaire was pilot tested by three Utah Cooperative Extension program leaders and two Idaho extension personnel. Pilot testers were instructed to complete the questionnaire and provide comments on the clarity of

the questionnaire. The draft underwent minor revisions and was then ready for the target population.

The questionnaire target population was Cooperative Extension personnel in Utah who could potentially use library services for extension-related purposes. Administrators were not included in the target population because their assistance was needed for other stages of this study. A total of 140 extension personnel were sent the questionnaire. The target population consisted of extension specialists, county agents, and technology agents.

The questionnaire was administered in conjunction with another concurrent study regarding questionnaire-response behavior. As a result, the questionnaire was administered in three different ways to three randomly assigned groups of the population. Each person in the questionnaire target population was randomly assigned to one of the three treatment groups. Each group was equally stratified between extension specialists, field agents, and technology specialists. Questionnaires were sent through USU distribution for on-campus addresses and the U.S. postal system for off-campus addresses. Returned questionnaires were recorded on a daily basis until thirty-seven days after the initial questionnaires were sent. All the data from the questionnaires were analyzed on SPSS for Windows except for the open responses. The open responses were typed verbatim using a word processor and grouped by questionnaire item.

The overall response rate for the population was 65 percent (91 out of 140). The results for each item on the questionnaire were compared between groups. The pattern of response for each item did not differ significantly between groups. There was no indication from the results that a nonresponse bias was present. The results presented here are based on all returned questionnaires. Valid percentages are reported unless noted otherwise. A valid percentage is based on valid responses to an item and does not include respondents who did not respond to that particular item.

Survey Results

The survey results helped identify areas in which library services could be implemented. Although the overall responses toward specific workshops and library services were ambivalent, some questions revealed very definite trends and tendencies. For the complete survey and results, see appendix A.

In terms of where extension personnel go to obtain their information and the type of information they use, the survey showed:

- ♦ Extension personnel most often use their personal libraries and fellow extension specialists to obtain information. During their busiest months, 68.6 percent of extension personnel consult their personal or office libraries daily and 22.2 percent of extension personnel consult other extension specialists daily. Of those surveyed, 18.6 percent consult their personal or office libraries on a weekly basis, and 52.5 percent consult extension specialists on a weekly basis.
- ♦ Respondents listed the Internet as a frequently used source of information.
- ♦ Personnel use books more frequently than other types of information. Books were used more often on a daily basis for information needs than other types of information (used books 28.1 percent daily). Government documents and publications were the second most frequently used items on a daily basis.
- ♦ Extension personnel located outside of Cache Valley rarely use USU Libraries; 91.3 percent of the respondents located outside Cache Valley used the USU Libraries less than once a month, versus 21.4 percent of personnel located on campus or in Cache Valley.
- ♦ Extension personnel are very comfortable with using e-mail (mean score of 4.3 out of 5) and uncomfortable with using FTP sites and Listservs (mean scores of 2.0 and 2.1 respectively).

The survey also revealed useful information about the time constraints under which agents work when providing information to their clients:

- ♦ Most personnel need to obtain information within one week.
- ♦ Most personnel need to answer a client's questions within one day; 69.2 percent of respondents need to answer a client's question within one day; 22.5 percent of respondents need to answer questions within three days.
- ♦ The busiest months when personnel need information are April and May, and the least busiest month is December.

The survey results led to a greater understanding of how extension agents and specialists are currently obtaining their information, their familiarity with technology, and the time constraints under which they must provide information. By considering the survey results in conjunction with what the USU Library could reasonably support, the librarians were able to identify existing services and develop new library services designed to assist extension personnel in obtaining information.

Identification, Development, and Marketing of Library Services for Extension Personnel

Using the survey results, the librarians selected services that seemed the most useful to extension personnel. The survey raised concerns that, as a whole, extension personnel were not aware of many of the existing library services available to them; therefore, this was one of the first areas to target. Since the majority of extension personnel indicated they were very comfortable with the Internet, the librarians decided to develop a World Wide Web (WWW) Extension page that would provide links to useful resources and information about the services available. Extension agents indicated they are very comfortable with e-mail, and that they regularly need short factual information. This in turn led to the decision to offer an e-mail reference service that would be for extension agents' exclusive use. As a result of the limited number of users, the USU librarians were able to pledge a quick response time for any e-mail reference queries, a prerequisite for any successful outreach program according to survey results.

To market these services, the librarians created a brochure describing the services and distributed it to all extension agents. This outreach program is designed to market library services and offer support of the information-gathering efforts of extension personnel. The goal is to create a climate that allows and encourages the use of library services in conjunction with extension personnel's daily workload.

First, the brochure outlines existing library policies and services, focusing on those that expand the resources available to extension agents. Included is information on connecting to USU's Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) and other OPACs throughout Utah, Interlibrary Services (ILS) policies and procedures, and borrowing materials directly from other libraries throughout the state. As members of the university community, extension personnel have the same rights and privileges as on-campus university members. This entitles them to access to library materials through traditional means like ILS or through less-known means like the Utah Academic Library Consortium Reciprocal Borrowing Program. While agents may have been aware of the ability to connect to USU's online catalog, it is likely that they were not aware of their rights to request materials through ILS or their ability to borrow materials from other Utah academic libraries. The USU OPAC allows users to search the OPACs of most campuses throughout Utah, and the Recipro-

cal Borrowing Program allows access and borrowing privileges to the libraries of these campuses. By addressing these basic issues of how to expand their access to library resources, we expect to encourage library use and, what is more important, timely access to needed library materials.

Second, the brochure announces the creation of an Extension Services WWW page (URL: <http://www.usu.edu/~library/Res/Ext/extref.html>) that contains links to many of the resources mentioned in the survey as being useful to extension agents. Agents indicated that they were moderately comfortable using the Web and that 94 percent had access to the Web. Since most agents indicated they work under tight time constraints, this familiarity and access to the Web offered the opportunity to pull together Internet resources that could provide instant access to needed information from the agent's office computers. Guided by the types of Internet sites the agents cited as useful, links were created to online full-text documents, including extension documents available from other states, database sites, e-journals, and the library's online Web resources. It is hoped that this will provide a convenient place for "one-stop shopping" for those agents already familiar with Internet resources and that it will serve to increase awareness of useful Internet sites for those agents not currently utilizing the Web.

Finally, the brochure describes the new e-mail reference service, which is limited to extension personnel. From the survey, e-mail reference was given the highest rating (3.8 score out of a possible 5) of any service that would be of interest to extension agents. The survey also indicated extension personnel were very comfortable with e-mail (4.3 score out of a possible 5) and 99 percent of the agents have e-mail.

E-mail reference offers several potential benefits to the extension personnel. It is perhaps the most appropriate means of providing timely access to information, another stated criterion necessary to meet the needs of extension agents, particularly since agents are scattered across the twenty-nine counties of Utah. Although limited to answering brief questions, e-mail reference can act as an excellent venue of communication, where previously there had been none, and help us initiate a dialogue with extension personnel.

The extension personnel's high levels of comfort using e-mail and their long history of e-mail use help ensure the success of this outreach program and will hopefully lead to further library outreach programs that help integrate the university library into the information resources used by extension personnel.

Conclusion

The initial response to the library's efforts has been minimal. Clearly, it is going to take continued efforts by the library to market its services to extension personnel. It is too early to critically analyze the use of the newly initiated e-mail reference service; however, one user has certainly indicated her feelings: "It's great to be able to have this service!"

An e-mail distribution list has been created of all extension personnel in Utah that will be used to notify agents of new services, point out valuable electronic resources, and remind them of the existing and emerging library services they can access. By maintaining contact with the extension agents and periodically reminding them of the help the library can provide, the university library hopes to assume an active role in assisting the agents in meeting their challenge of providing the people of Utah with the practical application of university-based research.

Advances in technology are also beginning to allow access to online full-text documents and document delivery systems. These systems offer the greatest potential in outreach services by offering quick turnaround times and desktop delivery. Currently, USU Libraries offer two such systems:

♦ **InfoTrac SearchBank.** A database of journal,

newspaper, and reference articles and citations. More than three thousand journals are indexed and approximately one thousand of these are available in full-text format, including images that can be viewed and downloaded. Access is available throughout the state of Utah to members of higher education, public education, and public library communities.

♦ **EBSCODoc.** A WWW-based document delivery system that offers access to the world of periodical literature and conference and symposium proceedings via an electronically linked network of EBSCO in-house and worldwide library sources.

Unfortunately, we currently have no way of knowing if extension personnel are using the InfoTrac database, so we have to remain committed to promotion tactics and communication to develop an ongoing rapport. EBSCODoc is not currently available to extension agents due to funding arrangements, but the USU librarians are recommending that access be given to support delivery of services as part of the university's mission. Communication seems to be the key to keeping in touch with the usage and changing needs of extension personnel who are scattered across the state. Only by building a system of trust and reliability can we hope to provide services to this community of users. ■

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