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### The Rural Free University and the Cooperative Extension Service

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The Cooperative Extension Service (CES) has been an acknowledged leader in rural adult education. As rural economies shift, however, many of the services offered through CES agents seem inappropriate. This paper explores the rural free university model and its usefulness in linking CES resources with local needs.

# The Rural Free University and the Cooperative Extension Service

by Jim Killacky

Throughout this special issue there is ample evidence and support for the assumption which underlies this paper - i.e. that for economic, social and cultural reasons, there is an increasing need for adult learning opportunities in rural America. The rural free university model has been shown to be effective in responding to the needs of rural adult learners (Killacky, 1984a). The Cooperative Extension Service (CES) is the largest adult education organization in the world (Knowles, 1977). This paper proposes the widespread development of the rural free university model by the CES. Although the rural model has been developed with some success by the CES in Kentucky (Quick, et al. 1982), there is still need for further development. The most recent blue-ribbon committee looking at the future of the CES notes "ways must be found to reach more people with educational programs through the CES" (USDA-NASULGC, 1983, p. 4).

## The Rural Free University Model

The rural free university model is based on the notion that anyone can teach and anyone can learn - everyone in the community is both a potential teacher and learner. Free universities offer ungraded, non-credit courses to the community. Developed by the University for Man (UFM) at Kansas State University, the free university model was extended to rural communities across Kansas beginning in 1975. There are now over 50 programs of rural free university education in that state involving more than 35,000 participants

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annually at a per capita cost of less than \$8. In Manhattan, where UFM is located, some 900 courses are offered each year engaging over 12,000 participants. Course leaders are all volunteers, and there are no credits or examinations. Courses both in Manhattan and in the smaller communities across the state cover every conceivable topic one could expect to find in any adult learning catalogue.

One substantive measure of the validity of the rural free university model lies in actions taken by the Kansas Legislature. In 1979 UFM proposed legislation that would make state funds available on a startup matching basis to communities wishing to form their own free university project. In an unprecedented action, the Legislature took only 10 weeks to pass and appropriate funding (\$40,000) for the Community Resource Act. Since then over 40 projects have been funded in an average amount of \$1,300 - showing that one does not need large amounts of funds for effective and responsive programs.

The rural free university model has brought considerable change to the face of adult education in rural Kansas. There is little argument about its success; and for its participants and communities, it accomplishes much. For example:

1. It demystifies learning.
2. It creates new interests and taps heretofore unrecognized community resources.
3. It provides informal and cost efficient learning opportunities, as there are no grades and leaders are all volunteers.
4. It keeps old skills alive and thriving.
5. It provides an important forum for nonthreatening attention to taboo subjects: alcoholism, spouse abuse, single parenting and a range of mental health issues.
6. It helps address the critical issues of rural isolation and the "nothing to do" syndrome.
7. It provides an entree for newcomers to a community and an opportunity for the emergence of new community leadership.
8. It allows participants and community members to cross social, economic and cultural barriers.
9. It is a means of fostering adult development, especially for rural women who wish to turn to new pursuits once their childrearing days are over.
10. It utilizes the skills, abilities and talents of older people, giving them an active role in the community and a vital sense of importance.
11. It provides a much needed clientele for the sponsors of such programs.
12. It opens the doors of learning to a population not usually disposed in that direction, and thereby creates an awareness of the potential in more formal academic pursuits.

## The Cooperative Extension Service

At the national level the CES is a division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. At the state level it is a division of the land-grant university. At the local level it operates from the County Extension Office - often located in the county courthouse. The fundamental goal of the CES, established by the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, is the transmission of practical knowledge to the people of the nation. This knowledge is generated primarily through the teaching and research functions at the University.

The CES currently operates in some 3,150 counties in the United States and its territories. Program areas include agriculture, natural resources and environment, home eco-

nomics, community development and the youth program 4-H. Some 18,000 staff members nationwide work for the CES, functioning as administrators, supervisors, state specialists and county agents. State specialists serve as the interpretive link between teaching/research at the university level and the county agents. Programs/information are transmitted locally through the 8,000 county agents who live and work with the people at the county level. Assistance is provided through demonstrations, meetings, workshops, short-courses, publications and mass-media. CES programs cover a wide range of topics, with a primary emphasis on education for increased efficiency in agricultural production and marketing. Other areas follow in decreasing order of priority. Matthews (1960) provided this useful summary of the methods and CES contributions to adult education:

1. During the two world wars and the Depression, the CES dealt effectively with disasterous situations because of the extensive formal and informal complex resource networks established by service workers.
2. The CES has effectively taught its staff to present information simply.
3. The CES has had a major role through adult education in fostering farmers' productivity.
4. The CES has fostered the involvement of learners - a basic principle of effective program building.
5. The CES has pioneered the demonstration method of teaching and the production of learning materials, especially visual aids and uses of the media.

The first and still major substantive criticism of the CES was the book *Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times* (1973) in which author Jim Hightower argued strongly that the CES had focused on helping large agricultural producers, ignoring the pressing needs of the majority of America's farmers and the great majority of rural people. Hightower's work served as a catalyst for a large number of reports, analyses, commissions and panels devoted to developing new plans and directions for the CES. Most recently, a blue-ribbon commission completed a major study titled *Extension in the '80s*, calling for the development and demonstration of new educational methodologies and delivery systems, for materials and programs having regional and national applications, and for greater numbers of volunteers in CES programs (USDA-NASULGC, 1983). The rural free university model provides the CES a strong and positive response - both to Hightower's criticism and its own blue-ribbon commission - but not without raising some questions.

### The Rural Free University and the CES

The integration of the rural free university model with the CES will call for a fundamental shift in the CES view of education and sources of knowledge. The cornerstone of the CES approach to learning is the demonstration method, involving professionally qualified people as transmitters of knowledge. The free university, on the other hand, draws primarily on the knowledge and wisdom of people at the local community level on the formal or informal expertise of local volunteers. This does not necessarily exclude the CES base, but it goes beyond the traditional sources, such as the university, for learning opportunities.

Additionally, there is a pragmatic problem of introducing new and innovative ideas in stressful times of economic and fiscal instability. Even though the free university model is very cost efficient, it represents change. During insecure times like these, there is often a tendency in large organiza-

tions such as the CES to stick with what "we know works."

An effective answer may rest in small scale development of programs within the CES combined with the dissemination of what is already known about rural free university efforts and the CES. For example, in 1979 UFM initiated a joint project with the CES in Kentucky. Now over one dozen local free university programs operate under the auspices of a local county extension office in various parts of that state. Although initiated because of the enthusiasm of the particular individuals involved rather than the CES as an institution, state leaders soon became interested when they saw the new audiences these projects reached. In an article in the *Journal of Extension* this important point was made about the different bases of knowledge between free universities and the CES:

SOS Learning Projects (the name of the Kentucky project) are taking a significant step by merging these two valuable yet distinct bases of knowledge and making the resulting information available to the local community. The fact that local citizens are responding in numbers beyond expectations suggests that this merger is meeting important needs.

(Quick et al., 1982, p. 11)

In Kansas several local free university programs cooperate with the CES by listing their offerings in the brochures, and one county extension office offers a limited free university program.

The following points outline steps that might be taken and directed to the state level leadership in the CES:

1. A brief review of the history of the CES and its role in that particular state. A proposed revised mission statement would include language reflecting the integration of the rural free university with the CES, thereby combining the CES's strength as a stable institution with its needs to actively engage a wider audience of learners, to bridge the have-have not gap in terms of participation, and to affirm rural values and culture.

2. The designation of a state specialist whose primary task would be to assist county staff members in adopting the free university model into their ongoing activities. This person would also take charge of research and evaluation efforts of the programs.

3. The development of a rationale that addresses issues such as:

- a) the new audiences this program will reach;
- b) the public relations benefits that will accrue to the CES as a result of positive reactions to the learning networks and systems created within the service area;
- c) the closeness of the rural free university model to the ideas central in the creation of the CES - the vitality of conservation, development of alternative resources and the concept of providing knowledge and information for rural people;
- d) the need to provide county staff with new and creative options for work. In light of the fact that agriculture now involves less than 3 percent of the population, the development of such options may be critical if the county staff are to avoid becoming professionally extinct.

The number of reports, blue-ribbon commissions and task forces looking into the future of the CES suggest that change in that organization is appropriate. While the rural free university model may not answer all of the issues being faced by the CES, it will make substantial con-

tributions to the enhancement of this giant in adult education. Furthermore, the rural free university model is consistent with the thinking and philosophies espoused by two early figures in the development of the CES. In 1911, Liberty Hyde Bailey wrote, "the materials and agencies that are part of the furniture of the planet, are to be used by each generation carefully, and with regard to the welfare of those to follow us" (1911, p. 178). Even earlier, Seaman Knapp—the acknowledged founder of the famed Extension demonstration method—might have been proposing the adoption of the rural free university model when in an address to extension workers in Mississippi he said:

Now let us have an education of the masses for the masses. Your mission is to solve the problems of poverty, to increase the measure of happiness, to add to the universal love of the country the universal love of knowledge and comfort, and to harness the forces of all learning to be useful and needful in human society.

(Knapp, 1952 p. 38)

The rural free university model holds the potential for helping the Cooperative Extension Service respond to these charges in a manner that would please both Bailey and Knapp.

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