Exploration of Engaged Practice in Cooperative Extension and Implications for Higher Education

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Exploration of Engaged Practice in Cooperative Extension and Implications for Higher Education

Abstract

Greater engagement has been emphasized as a need for Cooperative Extension for decades. Today this emphasis is also seen in higher education. Accordingly, there is need for clarity regarding the definition and community implementation of engagement. In the study described, I sought to address this need by conducting semistructured interviews with 35 Extension educators in two state Extension organizations. Emergent in the findings was the use of a hybrid model of program delivery in Cooperative Extension. Conceptual frameworks, definitions, and overviews of implementation for expert, engaged, and hybrid models are provided. Related implications for greater engagement in Cooperative Extension and higher education are presented.

Keywords: Extension engagement, higher education engagement, expert model, engaged model, hybrid model

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Introduction and Purpose

Calls for greater engagement of Cooperative Extension have been documented since the early 1960s (Fessler, 1964; Vines, Watts, & Parks, 1963) and continue today (Henning, Buchholz, Steele, & Ramaswamy, 2014; Reed, Swanson, & Schlutt, 2015). There are also calls for greater engagement in higher education (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities Task Force on The New Engagement Planning Team, 2016; Byrne, 1998/2016; Fear & Sandmann, 2016). There is opportunity for Extension to provide leadership in guiding higher education in this charge because of Extension's long history of connection in local communities (Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land Grant Universities, 1999; King & Boehlje, 2013; McDowell, 2003; Mitchell & Gillis, 2006; Peters, Alter, & Schwartzbach, 2010; Reed et al., 2015).

Although there has long been interest in greater engagement of Cooperative Extension, there has not been an operationalized definition of what engagement is or an understanding of how it is being or could be achieved. Further, there is no indication of what Extension needs to do specifically to move toward greater engagement. For the study described herein, I explored these gaps. My findings are useful for increasing understanding of the engaged model of program delivery for Cooperative Extension and for determining what constitutes engagement

within Cooperative Extension. They also provide guidance for increasing engagement of higher education in local communities. The study was unique in that the primary emphasis was on the use of expert and engaged models of program delivery at the local level.

Conceptual Frameworks

I began by developing conceptual frameworks to describe the expert and engaged models of program delivery for Cooperative Extension. From those frameworks I developed initial definitions and primary theories (Yin, 2009) on which to base my study.

Contributing Components

Three components contributed to my development of conceptual frameworks to describe the expert and engaged models of program delivery for Cooperative Extension. These components are (a) the educational approaches used by Extension (Franz & Townson, 2008), (b) theories of change associated with Extension work, and (c) normative traditions describing the work of Extension professionals (Peters et al., 2010).

Component 1: Educational approaches. The educational approaches used by Cooperative Extension are defined by their emphasis on content and process (Franz & Townson, 2008). These include facilitation, transformative education, service, and content transmission. On the basis of a review of the literature, I associated approaches low in process, service, and content transmission with the more traditional expert model of program delivery (Figure 1). I further determined that approaches high in process, facilitation, and transformative education are more consistent with the engaged model of program delivery (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Educational Approaches Used in Cooperative Extension as Related to Expert and Engaged Models of Program Delivery
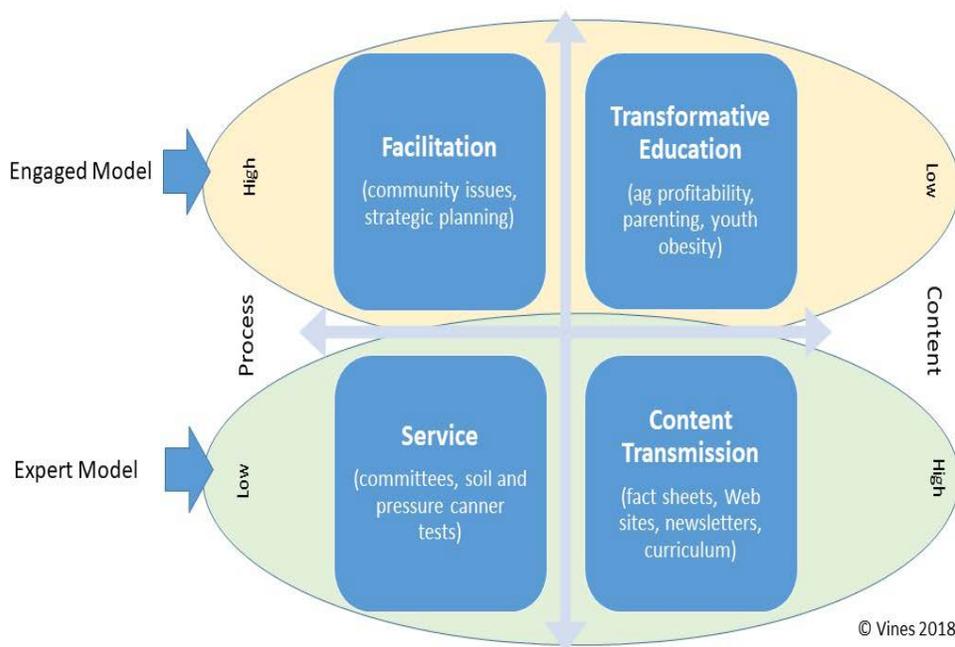
Component 2: Theories of change. I identified two theories of change related to the expert and engaged models of program delivery. These are diffusion of innovations theory and collective impact theory.

The traditional theory used to describe the work of Cooperative Extension has been Rogers's theory for diffusion of innovations (Foley, 2004; Franz, Piercy, Donaldson, Richard, & Westbrook, 2010; Seevers & Graham, 2012). This theory is consistent with the expert model of program delivery. It is based on education that targets innovators to encourage them to adopt innovations that improve processes or products (Figure 2). Development of new technologies and innovations and delivery of the pertinent information to clientele at the local level occurs through a hierarchical process (Rogers, 1995).

Figure 2.

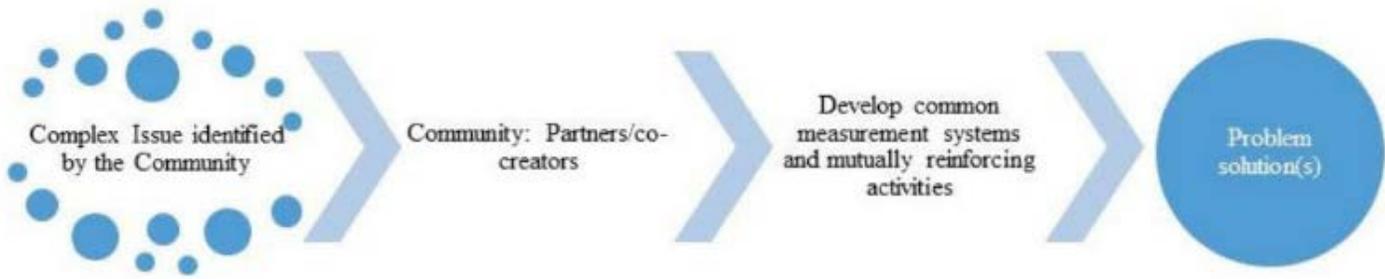Expert Model of Program Delivery Based on Rogers's Diffusion of Innovations Theory
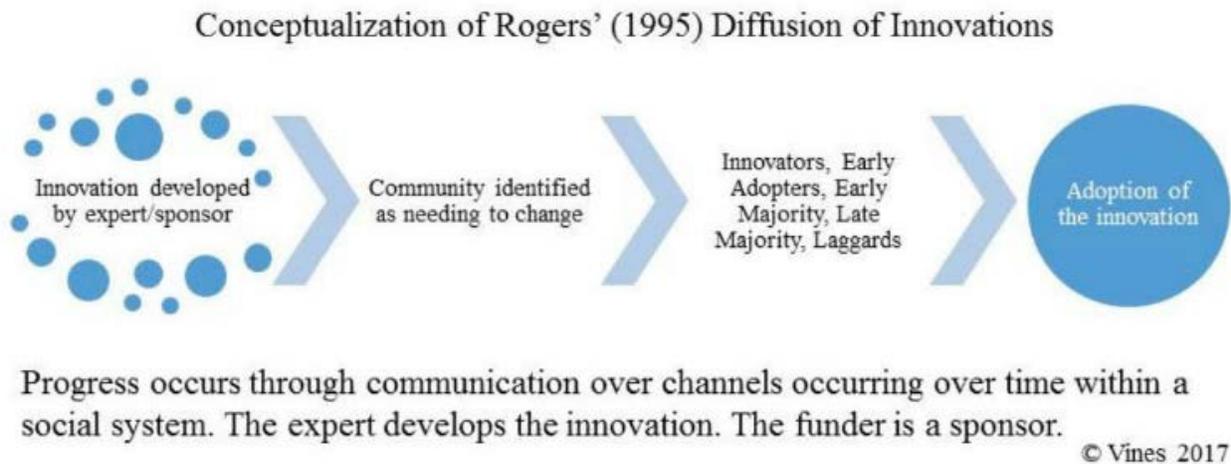
Collective impact theory has been used to describe work in adult education intended to strengthen communities and is consistent with engaged models for Cooperative Extension (Niewolny & Archibald, 2015). This theory describes how communities solve complex social issues involving multiple parties and provide for social change that cannot be achieved through the limited activities of individual organizations (Figure 3). Five conditions necessary for the achievement of collective impact are "a common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support organizations" (Kania & Kramer, 2011, "The Five Conditions of Collective Success," para. 1). Strong local connections and networks of resources help communities develop solutions. Responsibility for identifying the problem and solution is shared.

Figure 3.

Engaged Model of Program Delivery Based on Kania and Kramer's Collective Impact Theory

Conceptualization of Collective Impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011)

Complex Issue identified by the Community → Community: Partners/co-creators → Develop common measurement systems and mutually reinforcing activities → Problem solution(s)

Shared progress as a result of continuous communication among partners operating through support of a backbone organization. Includes multiple sources of expertise. The funder is also a partner.

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Component 3: Normative traditions. This component focuses on faculty roles in society associated with the expert and engaged models (Peters et al., 2010). Peters et al. (2010) defined four normative traditions related to these roles. For my study, I used the service intellectual tradition and a combined version of the action researcher, public scholar, and education organizer traditions.

The faculty member using the service intellectual tradition sees his or her work in society as responding to questions and providing services (Peters et al., 2010). As a service intellectual, the public role of a faculty member is "limited to the provision of facts, knowledge, technical assistance, and technologies" (Peters et al., 2010, p. 52). This tradition is consistent with the role of Extension professionals as change agents using the diffusion of innovations theory in the expert model of program delivery.

A faculty member using the action researcher/public scholar/education organizer tradition plays the multiple roles encompassed in the tradition, valuing shared expertise through ongoing two-way communication between the university and local citizens (Peters et al., 2010). Citizens are involved in identifying needs, developing and implementing programming to address those needs, and evaluating achievements (Peters et al., 2010), actions that characterize engagement (Beaulieu & Cordes, 2014; Bridger & Alter, 2006; Byrne, 1998/2016; Sandmann, Furco, & Adams, 2016). These faculty members' connecting of the university to the local community exemplifies the use of an engaged model of program delivery and provides mutual benefits of shared learning to all parties (Bridger & Alter, 2006; Byrne, 1998/2016; Peters, Jordan, Alter, & Bridger, 2003; Sandmann et al., 2016). The university is a desirable partner for a citizenry because of the breadth of expertise it represents and the potential for application of that expertise to address a wide range of unique, complex challenges in communities.

Overarching Frameworks

Using these components, I developed overarching conceptual frameworks for the expert model (Figure 4) and the engaged model (Figure 5) of program delivery for Cooperative Extension. The framework for the expert model emphasizes one-way communication and demonstrates the role of the university via Extension in providing expertise through technological innovations. The framework for the engaged model demonstrates two-way communication and shared expertise as the partners work collectively to develop culturally relevant, contextual solutions.

Figure 4.

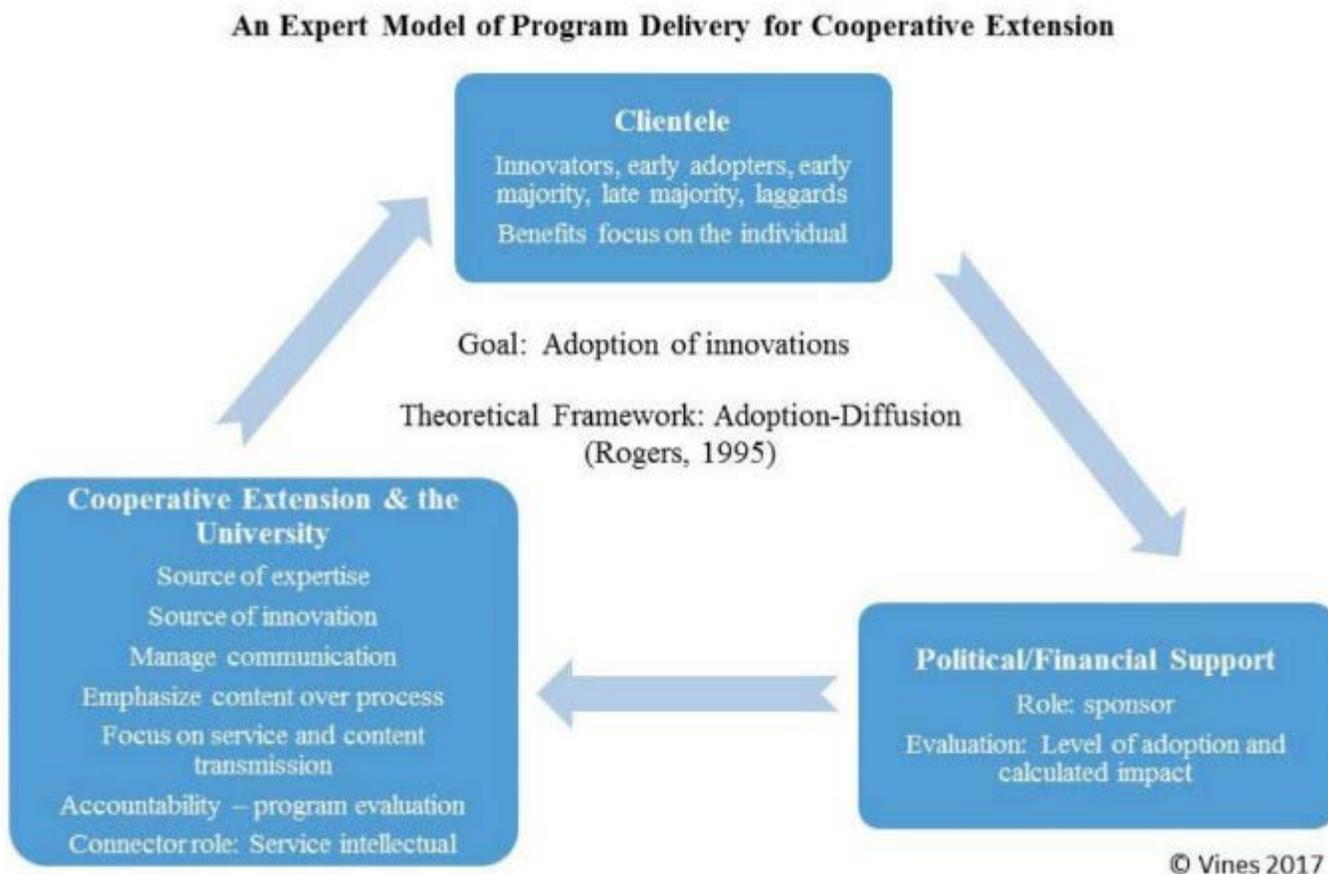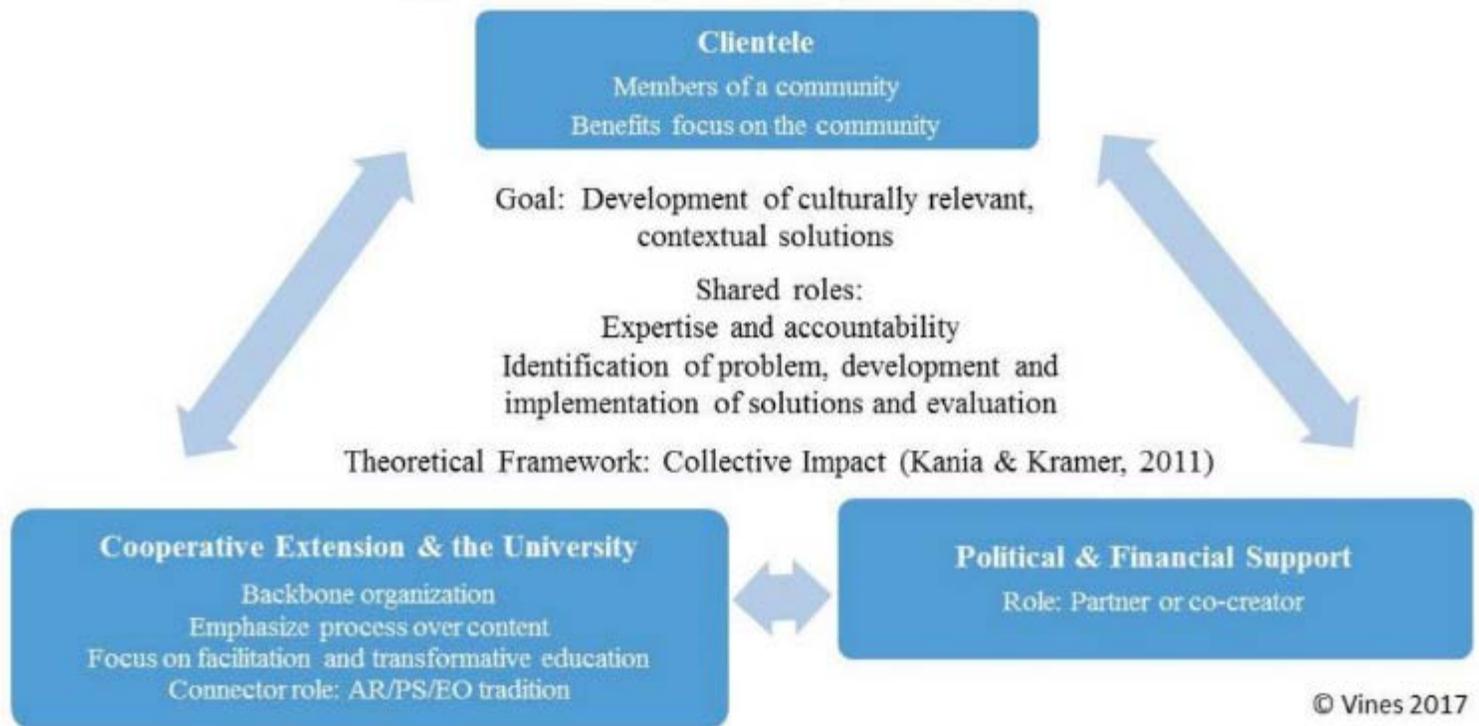Conceptual Framework for the Expert Model of Program Delivery for Cooperative Extension

Figure 5.

Conceptual Framework for the Engaged Model of Program Delivery for Cooperative Extension

An Engaged Model of Program Delivery for Cooperative Extension

Clientele
Members of a community
Benefits focus on the community

Goal: Development of culturally relevant,
contextual solutions

Shared roles:
Expertise and accountability
Identification of problem, development and
implementation of solutions and evaluation

Theoretical Framework: Collective Impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011)

Cooperative Extension & the University
Backbone organization
Emphasize process over content
Focus on facilitation and transformative education
Connector role: AR/PS/EO tradition

Political & Financial Support
Role: Partner or co-creator

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AR = action researcher. PS = public scholar. EO = education organizer.

Methods and Data Sources

To develop research questions, identify purposes, and determine data collection methods for my study, I used three primary theories (Yin, 2009). Those theories were that (a) definitions of engaged and expert models of program delivery exist and are operationalized within Cooperative Extension, (b) Extension educators use both engaged and expert models of program delivery in accordance with the situations they are trying to address, and (c) there are organizational supports and barriers, beyond but including that of program area assignment, which may encourage use of one model over another.

The research questions I based on those theories were as follows:

1. How is an engaged model of program delivery defined within Cooperative Extension?

2. How is engagement implemented, and more specifically, when and why is an engagement method used as opposed to an expert model?

3. Are there barriers and drivers associated with Extension's move toward a more engaged model?

Following from the research questions, my purposes for the study were to define engagement within the context of Cooperative Extension, to increase understanding of how and why engagement is implemented by educators at the local level, and to identify barriers and drivers associated with the adoption of an engaged model of program delivery.

Because of the exploratory nature of the study, I used a qualitative research approach. Through an embedded

case study, I sought to describe the phenomena of expert versus engaged models of Extension program delivery within the context of two state Extension organizations. I selected the states and program areas to focus on through critical case sampling based on survey responses from a panel of experts. I used purposeful random sampling to identify successful Extension educators in program areas thought to emphasize the expert and engaged models of program delivery and then conducted semistructured interviews with 35 Extension educators in the two state Extension organizations. I collected additional data via unstructured interviews with the state Extension directors for the selected states.

Results and Conclusions

The definitions for the expert and engaged models of program delivery of Cooperative Extension developed through the study are as follows:

> The *expert model* of program delivery in Cooperative Extension emphasizes a one-way flow of information, although interaction with clientele exists in the form of discussion, questions, and feedback. The university, through Extension, serves as the expert. In this role, Extension provides guidance and information and responds to questions. Expertise provided by the university is research based, and the providers of expertise are carefully vetted representatives of the university. The community may be involved in the identification of program needs. Program planning, implementation, and evaluation are internal activities of Extension. Other terms used to refer to this model are outreach, a bucket-filler approach, and top-down programming.

> The *engaged model* of program delivery in Cooperative Extension is characterized by community involvement in all aspects of program development: identification of issues to be addressed, construction of a process for implementation and development of knowledge, evaluation, and securing of funding. Expertise and learning processes are shared. In the engaged model, Extension serves as a conduit between the community and the university. The engaged model is based on relationships with the community developed through continual interaction, partnerships, and collaborations. Relationships and learning extend beyond traditional program boundaries. Learning experiences involving an engaged model are robust and rich, as the community works in both formal and informal settings to identify problems and develop solutions.

During the study, a third model of program delivery emerged and is identified as a hybrid model. The proposed definition for this model is as follows:

> The *hybrid model* of program delivery in Cooperative Extension is used to involve clientele in the delivery of programming that meets local needs. The model emphasizes shared expertise that comes from the university, stakeholder organizations, and individual stakeholders. Stakeholders are also considered to be partners. Partners are involved in multiple aspects of programming, and their roles may vary according to location. There is emphasis on continual interaction between Extension and the community throughout the programming process. In this model, the university provides state interest teams, data on trends, and other research findings while the local community is responsible for application. The community is defined by interest rather than geography. In this model, an expert approach may be used initially to increase community awareness in a subsequent, more engaged programming approach.

Educators participating in the study were asked to describe how they used the three identified models. Their responses, summarized in Table 1, related to the categories of reasons for use, sources of expertise, program

delivery methods, venues for program delivery, and partner roles.

Table 1.

Summary of Educators' Use of the Expert, Engaged, and Hybrid Models

	Model		
Finding	**Expert**	**Engaged**	**Hyb**
Reasons for use			
To capitalize on the attributes of the educator or topic (e.g., time management, personal preference)	X		
To allow cocreation with partners		X	X
To achieve better learning outcomes		X	
To address specific types of topics		X	
To build and strengthen relationships and social networks		X	
To develop and improve program support		X	
To develop solutions in complex situations		X	X
To introduce engaged programming	X		
To introduce other Extension programming	X		
To meet needs based on Extension's role		X	
To meet specific audience or community needs	X		
To provide education for specific purposes (e.g., mandated programs, research presentation, response to specific questions, provision of specific types of information, attention on statewide themes, provision of professional services)	X		
To provide information	X		
To provide sustainable solutions		X	
To apply both the expert model and the engaged model			X
To have active learning experiences with audiences			X
To improve learning and retention			X
Sources of expertise			
4-H advisors/officers/teen leaders		X	
Chambers of commerce			X
Clientele		X	
Community members/groups		X	

Extension advisory committees		X	
Extension educators	X	X	X
Neighboring universities	X		
Learners		X	
Legislators	X		
Medical community			X
Scientific literature	X		
State specialists	X		
University	X		X
Youths		X	
Program delivery methods			
Demonstrations	X	X	
Face-to-face interaction	X	X	X
Facilitated meeting with moderated question session	X		
Flipped classrooms		X	
Lecturing/PowerPoint presentations	X		
Net facts or guides for online download	X		
Newsletters	X		
Online interaction: social media discussions, email		X	X
Panel discussions		X	
Personalized interactions	X		X
Phone calls	X		
Press releases	X		
Producer presentations, peer-instructor events		X	
Site assessments	X		
Small-group experiences		X	
Social media posts	X		
Technology-enhanced polling		X	
Tours		X	
Troubleshooting	X		
Use of open-ended questions		X	
Video presentations	X		

	Col 1	Col 2	Col 3
Webinars	X		
Venues for program delivery			
Conference or exposition			X
Television	X		
Internet	X	X	X
Partner roles			
Data analysis		X	
Delivery method recommendation	X		
Development of solutions		X	X
Financial support for programs and personnel		X	X
Identification of other potential partners		X	
Implementation of research		X	
Needs assessment	X		X
Presentation, including presentation of research findings		X	X
Problem identification		X	
Program implementation		X	
Program planning		X	X
Program promotion			X
Research data collection		X	
Site selection for research projects		X	

Finally, through the study, I identified barriers and drivers associated with Extension's move toward an engaged model of program delivery. The barriers educators identified are summarized below, with those mentioned most frequently at the top of the list.

- *Time required.* Using an engaged approach takes more time due to the occurrence of multiple interactions with clientele.

- *Difficulty with coordination.* Coordinating educators' own schedules with those of community members to create opportunities for ongoing interaction is difficult.

- *Need for timeliness.* Educators sometimes need to respond to an issue quickly, and the engaged model does not accommodate this need.

- *Existing expertise.* Educators have more experience with and are more comfortable using an expert approach.

- *Unwilling collaborators.* Other educators and specialists are not always willing to use an engaged model if they have not mastered such an approach.

- *Loss of control.* Using an engaged approach may result in loss of control over the content and quality of educational programming.

- *"Expert knows best" perspective.* Educators feel that they know what their communities need and do not need community input in the programming process.

- *Clientele who just want answers.* Sometimes people just want an answer to a question, not education on a topic.

- *Lack of alignment with evaluation metrics.* Educators' performances may be evaluated according to the number of activities and contacts they report, and an engaged approach allows for fewer of both of these elements.

- *Environmental limitations.* Interaction with clientele sometimes is not possible due to large audience sizes or the need for online presentations.

- *Emphasis on impartiality.* By involving clientele, educators may be seen as supporting sides regarding various issues.

The drivers educators associated with use of the engaged model are summarized below, with those mentioned most frequently at the top of the list.

- *Local program support.* Use of an engaged model of program delivery increases program support.

- *Organizational support.* The Extension directors in both states were viewed by educators as supportive of the use of an engaged model of program delivery.

- *Stronger programs.* Programs based on the engaged model are more responsive to community needs and more sustainable.

- *Better outcomes.* More behavior change leading to long-term outcomes occurs when an engaged model is used. In addition, identifying outcomes is easier because of the ongoing nature of programs and the strong relationships that develop.

- *Support for the future of Extension.* Because of the increased support garnered and impact provided, the engaged model of program delivery is the only model that offers long-term support for the future of Extension.

Significance for Theory, Research, and Practice

Through my study, I developed operationalized definitions of the expert, engaged, and hybrid models of program delivery for Cooperative Extension. This result fills a void and will improve conversations around engagement by providing a common meaning. The definition for the engaged model is consistent with, although more detailed than, the definition of engagement provided by the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement used in higher education in general (New England Resource Center for Higher Education, n.d.). Both expert and engaged models of program delivery are used in Cooperative Extension, and there is agreement on what they entail. These may more appropriately be combined to form the hybrid model of program delivery, which may provide

greater representation of what is used and what is desirable because of the way in which it accommodates shared expertise.

Examples of the use of the expert and engaged models are consistent with the educational approaches for Extension described by Franz and Townson (2008) and as classified as expert or engaged in this study. Degree of interaction with clientele and desired outcomes may contribute to defining these approaches, in addition to process and content. Being able to identify the educational approaches used in the Extension organization is useful for connecting resource allocation and delivery methods.

The theory of collective impact (Kania & Kramer, 2011) is consistent with the engaged work being carried out by educators at the local level. Educators generally involve their communities in needs assessment regardless of the model used. However, there is opportunity for many Extension programs to move to a more fluid model of problem solving characterized by collective impact. This change can be accomplished by adapting program planning processes and evaluation of programs and performance to encourage greater engagement. Examples of ongoing communication and evaluation methods identified by communities using this process will provide insight into how this theory may be more fully implemented. The characteristics Extension organizations look for when selecting Extension professionals and administrators may change as Extension moves toward greater engagement.

The model of engaged program delivery presented herein indicates that Cooperative Extension has developed strong relationships on which universities can build as they seek greater engagement. This is especially true when considering the research and outreach missions of the land-grant universities. Greater attention needs to be paid to how students are incorporated into the engaged work of Cooperative Extension. Also, interaction between Extension professionals at the local level and those on the university campus must be planned to foster development of relationships that can provide opportunity for collaboration based on areas of expertise.

There are barriers and drivers associated with use of the engaged model. However, these may not be based on program area. Many of the barriers can be overcome by building on existing organizational and community support. Extension educators need to be given assurance that the time investment in an engaged model is recognized and appreciated. Changes in evaluation processes need to be made throughout the university to reflect emphasis on community engagement, with attention on the different roles of local and campus faculty. The emphasis of faculty evaluation at the university level may relate more to content, whereas evaluation at the community level in an engaged model may relate more to process. University organizations need to accept this circumstance and support measures that are most appropriate to the work that is expected according to the faculty role.

Further exploration of the perspectives of Extension stakeholders, specialists, and administrators regarding the shift to an engaged model of program delivery is recommended. There may be room for revision of the definition of the engaged model as Cooperative Extension works with communities toward achieving collective impact that encompasses all aspects of developing solutions to community issues rather than focuses solely on educational programs. There is also need for further study to describe the hybrid model. This blended model seems to provide opportunity to combine expertise from multiple sources within the local context to provide more appropriate, sustainable solutions.

Acknowledgments

study. In addition, I acknowledge and extend thanks to my dissertation committee chair, Connie Baggett, and committee members Ted Alter, Linda Caldwell, and Ed Yoder from The Pennsylvania State University and committee member Eric Kauffman from Virginia Tech.

Recommendation for Further Reading

This overview is derived from my doctoral dissertation titled *Engagement Through Cooperative Extension: Towards Understanding Meaning and Practice Among Educators in Two State Extension Systems*, which is published at The Pennsylvania State University. The dissertation is available in its entirety at https://etda.libraries.psu.edu/catalog/13816kav11.

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