OSU Extension in Urban Communities: A Case Study

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Abstract. With a presence in all 88 Ohio counties, Ohio State University Extension strives to engage citizens within urban, rural, and suburban communities. As populations have shifted, so has the need of Ohio's urban counties. Thus, to help ensure Extension remains vibrant, relevant, and accessible in all communities, a team of faculty, staff, and students conducted a case study, focusing on the National Urban Extension Leaders four themes of positioning, programs, personnel, and partnerships. The data provided insight into what Extension can do to address the urban context of scale, diversity, complexity, and urban-rural interface.

INTRODUCTION

For more than a century, Ohio State University (OSU) Extension has fulfilled its mission of creating opportunities for people to explore how science-based knowledge can improve social, economic, and environmental conditions across Ohio (Crossgrove et al., 2005; Gaolach et al., 2017). Initially, Extension units across the nation addressed the needs, values, and concerns of rural Americans. As people moved into more suburban and urban communities, Extension began offering more diverse programming, such as health and nutrition, financial literacy, community development, and protection of the environment (Franz & Towson, 2008). However, there remains opportunity to move beyond rural perspectives and address the urban context in research, program development, and organizational planning (Gaolach et al., 2017; Panshin, 1992; Young & Jones, 2017).

With a presence in all 88 Ohio counties, OSU Extension, within the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences (CFAES), continues to advance engagement with urban, rural, and suburban Ohio communities. Shifts in demographic composition, community conditions, and needs require Extension personnel to develop unique strategies to bring people, communities, and ideas together in ways that are relevant locally, responsive statewide, and recognized on a national scale.

While urban and rural areas share common issues, such as food access, persistent poverty, homelessness, educational inequalities, and health disparities, addressing these issues in urban areas requires approaches that recognize the scale, diversity, and complexity of metropolitan neighborhoods.

Adapting methods used in rural areas, from rural perspectives, is not sufficient to address those same issues within urban communities. Thus, in 2015, the National Urban Extension Leaders (NUEL) identified four essential themes in which urban areas represent unique challenges and opportunities for Extension: positioning, programs, personnel, and partnerships (National Urban Extension Leaders [NUEL], 2015).

Through in-person interviews, an OSU Extension team explored each of these themes with Extension personnel from Ohio's six most populated counties. For the purpose of this case study, the term *urban* refers to Ohio's six most populated counties: Cuyahoga (Cleveland), Franklin (Columbus), Hamilton (Cincinnati), Lucas (Toledo), Montgomery (Dayton), and Summit (Akron). Each of these counties, with the exception of Cuyahoga, is unique because it consists of urban, suburban, and rural communities within its boundaries. As with most urban counties, each comprises multiple municipalities, local government agencies, and local school districts, as districts are not county-based. Additionally, numerous faith- and community-based organizations operate within each of these counties. Also, as noted by Gaolach et al. (2015), as in most urban areas, a great degree of ethnic, racial, and economical diversity exists within these counties.

METHODS

This study used the multiple case study approach to identify characteristics, similarities, and sentiments that are common across Ohio's urban counties. Our approach was interpretive

and analytical rather than solely descriptive (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995). This approach was selected to illuminate contextual aspects of the situation to gather agreed-upon and diverse views (Lauckner et al., 2012).

In December 2019 and January 2020, a graduate and undergraduate student visited each of Ohio's urban counties to facilitate one-on-one and/or group interviews with Extension personnel. Protocol was established through a case study guide, and this study was submitted for approval to The Ohio State University's Office of Research Institutional Review Board (IRB).

At least two Extension personnel from each county participated in the interviews ($n = 19$). Eligibility criteria for personnel to participate were as follows: (a) they had to be an OSU Extension employee in an urban county and (b) they were able to give consent. Participation was voluntary for all participants. To recruit participants, an email was sent to the area leader in each urban county, explaining the study and the participant eligibility criteria. To remove participation barriers to the greatest extent possible, all interviews were conducted at county Extension offices. Participants were given the option to interview one-on-one or in a group setting.

To explore the four NUEL themes in depth, a semistructured approach with open-ended questions was used during the interviews (Weller et al., 2018). Participants were asked 28 questions within the following themes: positioning, programming, personnel, and partnerships. They were also asked eight closing questions about their successes, their struggles, their uniqueness, their hopes, and other feedback that they wanted to share with leadership. Observational notes and photographs were also taken during each visit. Additionally, some interviews were audio-recorded, based on each participant's consent. The initial topics that emerged through the interviews were shared and discussed at the January 2020 Summit on OSU Extension in Urban Communities.

As a follow-up to the initial interviews, the team revisited each of the counties via Zoom to facilitate one-on-one and/or group interviews with prior participants to review and confirm initial findings. Findings of the postvisit interviews were shared with the OSU Extension Urban Steering Council, a diverse group that guides OSU Extension's intentional approach to Ohio's urban influence and rural-urban interface.

RESULTS

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) of analysis, assigning and organizing codes into meaningful concepts. For reliability purposes, five members of our research team analyzed the recorded and written responses to the interviews by using NVivo software. After reading through the transcriptions, the codebook was created by a researcher on the team and verified by the other researchers. Then, our team collaboratively reviewed the coding system for validity. Next, our team coded the transcriptions independently, and then the files were combined for the final analysis.

During the analysis process, key topics were identified for each NUEL theme and the closing section of the interview. Topics that participants mentioned more frequently and across a majority of the counties were identified. Table 1 summarizes the findings of the interviews.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

OSU Extension employees, located within urban counties, identified interrelated priorities of increasing accessibility, addressing diversity, fostering partnerships, expanding awareness of urban context, and improving state-level support. The results indicate that actions tailored to better support urban Extension personnel, programming, and growth across Ohio should involve intentional efforts. Those efforts could be to empower and diversify county staff; enhance professional development opportunities; address accessibility issues; and cultivate a more welcoming environment for urban county staff by educating state and Extension personnel not based in urban areas on urban contexts, needs, and challenges. In the ensuing sections, we broaden our discussion of these areas by suggesting practical implications that have emerged from our findings and are interwoven across NUEL themes.

POSITIONING

The importance of addressing accessibility as a means of enhancing programming, personnel, and partnerships was found to be a relevant positioning concern.

In urban counties, there is tremendous opportunity for diverse populations to have a first-time Extension experience through effective positioning. For those who are familiar with Extension, marketing images are perceived as being overly representative of commodity agriculture and county fairs. When considering accessibility, county offices are not always centrally located or in close proximity to bus routes and highways. To support Extension's positioning in urban communities, it is imperative to engage internal and external partners and to improve personnel's working knowledge of Extension in the urban context.

PROGRAMMING

The findings reveal that Extension programming, quality of service, and outreach efforts within urban counties could be substantially improved when the diversity of the county's Extension professionals is representative of the county and they exhibit a high level of cultural awareness.

OSU Extension in Urban Communities: A Case Study

Establishing and promoting an open and diverse environment can produce new opportunities for Extension personnel and Extension as a whole (Grogan & Eshelman, 1998). The need to increase diversity within OSU Extension was referenced by participants in each of the urban counties, demonstrating a dire need to address diversity within each of NUEL's core themes. While participants primarily discussed the need for diversity among personnel at the local and state levels, other specific concerns included diversity of thought and programming, diversity of clientele, availability of multiple languages, and cultural competency. As OSU Extension looks to increase its urban footprint, it is imperative that the organization bolster personnel from diverse backgrounds, as their differences enrich and expand the organization and provide a competitive edge (Grogan & Eshelman, 1998; Makower, 1995). Ewert et al. (1995) indicated that cultural diversity affects organizations in several ways, including the recruitment/retention of staff, management styles and decision-making processes, and relationships within organizations. Recognizing, valuing, promoting, and supporting

diversity in an inclusive environment can maximize the productivity of everyone in the organization, ultimately improving program reach and impact.

PERSONNEL

Cultivating a more welcoming and understanding environment for urban-based Extension's unique needs is important.

While several areas were identified as ways to cultivate a more welcoming and open environment for urban-based Extension personnel, increased autonomy and empowerment at the local level were high. Throughout this theme, participants shared their opinions and recommendations on cultivating a more urban-friendly atmosphere within Extension. Participants shared thoughts as they related to Extension leadership, organizational and operational needs, and inclusive decision making. Participants believed that if they were provided with more autonomy to develop, organize, and prioritize programming within their county, especially as it relates to 4-H youth development, they would be better situated to address their community's needs. It is vital for Exten-

Table 1. Case Study Interrelated Themes and Key Topics

Theme	Key topics	Comments
Positioning	• Accessibility Issues • Branding Issues • Resource to County Residents • Need for Additional State-Level Extension Involvement	• Participants noted accessibility issues that they face with their office location, including the distance from bus routes, the physical location within the county/city, and safety concerns within the surrounding neighborhood. • Marketing/branding concerns included the lack of branding on the outside of their physical buildings, the frustration of having no formal Extension logo, the confusion and disconnect that results from leading with the college logo, and the lack of funding to support marketing initiatives within the county. • When positioning themselves in their county and/or during meetings with partners, county staff explain that Extension is "a resource, in every county, for all residents using the resources and knowledge of the university." • Participants reported receiving limited state-level support to maintain office locations.
Programs	• Diverse Audiences • Community Needs • 4-H Youth Engagement • State Level Evaluations • Need for Urban Focused Resources and Specialists at the State Level • Staffing and Funding	• Participants noted a stark difference between urban and rural program needs and assessment. • County personnel noted their dependency on community input or needs assessments to determine programming priorities and needs within their county. • Frustration with the state office's evaluations and reporting processes was seen as an issue at the local level. Participants noted that prior assessments were not useful or reflective of their communities and wished that state personnel were more involved in the county office's process of developing and collecting data for the assessments. • 4-H differs immensely between urban and rural counties, and in larger populated areas, 4-H focuses more on special-interest clubs and in-school programming than on community clubs. • Some counties expressed a desire to have state specialists visit their counties more often. • Participants expressed their concerns about Extension leadership's fully understanding and recognizing the unique needs of urban counties. They believe that this misunderstanding leads to underfunding, understaffing, and underprioritizing in comparison to the size, needs, complexity, and diversity of urban communities.

Table 1. (*continued*)

Theme	Key topics	Comments
Personnel	• Diversity • Cultural Awareness • Community Engagement • Resourceful • Professional Development • Urban-Rural Comparison • Pay, Livable Wage, and Opportunity for Advancement	• Diversity among personnel was noted as an issue, as most county staff do not represent the diversity of the respective county. • The need for a high level of cultural awareness coupled with the ability to have an open mind (without being stereotypical and/or judgmental, even if it does not align with personal beliefs) is seen as important for working in an urban county. • Personnel in urban counties identified the ability to directly engage with the community; network across multiple settings, levels, and professional ranks; and have a strong understanding of the historical and educational structures within the community as important to success. • The ability to adequately demonstrate that Extension has a vested interest in the success of the community and deliver on their promises was deemed of dire importance. • The need for additional professional development, specifically for urban Extension personnel, was of high interest. Participants noted that current professional development sessions were more rurally focused and that urban areas were either left out or were an afterthought, which can feel very dismissive, thus rendering the session not useful for them. Suggestions included regionally based professional development sessions (not solely in Columbus); the ability to offer sessions via Zoom; and resuming the mentoring program. • Additionally, there was interest in an urban-rural Extension exchange program that would allow rural community Extension personnel to see what it is like in urban areas and vice versa. The focus would be to better educate everyone about the various perspectives of Extension. • A divide between urban and rural Extension is perceived to exist. Some participants believe that the divide starts at the leadership level and trickles down to the county offices/personnel. Additionally, it was noted that it is often challenging for urban Extension personnel to reach out to their rural Extension counterparts to share best practices, collect ideas, or share information because their rural counterparts do not understand urban contexts. So, they rely more on other urban personnel, even from different focus areas. • More career trajectories/pathways for personnel working in urban Extension are needed. • Pay rates for urban Extension personnel are not equitable to the cost of living within an urban community; this issue has been noted as a contributor to retention and recruitment issues within urban communities.
Partnerships	• Local Government Agencies • K–12 Schools • Other Universities • Multiple partnerships	• Multiple counties mentioned their working relationship/partnership with local government agencies (LGAs). While some struggle more than others, each county has an established LGA partnership in some capacity. LGA partnership includes county commissioners, city government, Metroparks, libraries, and so forth. • Counties relied on their partnerships with local school districts within their counties to recruit youths and/or host programming. • Partnerships formed with other universities, due to proximity, shared goals, or other reasons/needs, were noted by multiple counties. • The need to partner with other organizations throughout the county, due to multiple agencies competing for the same funds or audience, was noted as a benefit and a challenge for urban Extension.

Table 1. (*continued*)

Theme	Key topics	Comments
Closing Comments	• Funding • Future of Urban Extension • Capacity Concerns • Teamwork • Understand Urban Extension	• The state needs to provide additional funding and staffing support in urban counties to match/meet the needs of the counties and to be equitable in terms of population size. Base funding helps leverage additional partnership support. • Wider understanding of Extension's plan to support urban-serving Extension offices in the future and of where urban Extension in Ohio will be in the next five years is needed. • Capacity concerns, ranging from inefficient staffing levels to meet the needs of their county/audience to lack of funding, are seen as issues. Urban personnel believe that they are just a "drop in the bucket" and that due to "systemic development," they are not set up to be successful. • Teamwork, collaboration, and dedication to the work of urban Extension among county office personnel were identified as strong assets. • The need for Extension leadership and personnel in state office units to better understand the work and complexity of urban Extension is dire. It was noted that the leadership team needs to recognize that the work happening within urban counties matters just as much as that in rural counties. • Extension must let go of stereotypical beliefs and misconceptions of "urban." It was mentioned that "urban does not mean 'Black' or 'poor and Black' or 'poor and dangerous.'" • Just because personnel/programs/situation/environments do not fit the traditional model does not mean that they are not important. • The leadership team must stop "patronizing urban counties." Urban personnel feel as though the leadership team has been guarded when it comes to urban areas, trying not to offend the traditional Extension base. "They have to stop apologizing [to rural areas] for what is happening in the urban communities and their level of engagement with those areas and embrace it and explain that what is happening in Extension in urban communities will and needs to be different than that of the rural communities."

sion's success within urban communities for programming to meet the community's unique needs instead of taking a more traditional approach. Furthermore, research has suggested that the organizational practices (Anaza et al., 2012), policies, and environmental factors of employee empowerment are found to strongly affect employees' performance and overall job satisfaction. Thus, providing urban county personnel with the necessary support, resources, and autonomy will ultimately enhance urban Extension programming, partnerships, and personnel satisfaction.

PARTNERSHIPS

The importance of establishing and managing partnerships with external organizations was identified as a critical need for the success of local Extension offices.

Partnerships are critical to Extension's success when missions are aligned, roles are distinct, reciprocal resources are leveraged, and impacts are shared. In urban communities, the number, size, and scope of partnerships amplify opportunities and challenges. Urban areas have a wealth of organizations to partner with, but it can be challenging to efficiently navigate multiple partnerships with varying proj-

ect timelines. Rather than competing for the same funds or audiences, collaborative efforts can make real impacts.

Throughout this theme, participants shared their experiences of creating long-lasting partnerships with organizations in the community. Participants discussed how there are more competing interests in urban areas, so Extension is most successful when they collaborate rather than compete. Developing partnerships differs in urban counties because of the extensive partnership opportunities, as opposed to a rural setting, where Extension is more prominent in the community.

CONCLUSION

The case study informed OSU Extension leadership of potential improvements as aligned with the National Framework for Urban Extension. The interview results indicated that improved strategies for positioning, programming, personnel, and partnerships within Ohio's urban Extension offices are dependent on the increased awareness and understanding of the urban context by OSU Extension and CFAES. Additionally, we must make note of the expectation that

Extension and college-level leadership will play a significant role in shaping this cultural shift by openly supporting urban Extension offices and being responsive and understanding to their unique needs in terms of positioning, programming, personnel, and partnerships. These findings are the foundation for an emerging multiyear plan of work for OSU Extension's intentional approach to Ohio's urban influence and urban-rural interface. The plan will be integrated into the state Extension's plan of work that encompasses what is unique and what is similar in urban, suburban, and rural communities.

Limitations of the study include the number of participants interviewed and the nonuse of random selection. However, the research team recognizes the value of the data collected to help inform a plan of work and the significance of aligning a plan of work with the national urban Extension framework and OSU Extension's strategic alignment and planning. A case study guide detailing the entire process is available for future replication or use by other urban-serving Extension teams.

AUTHOR NOTE

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