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Looking Ahead: Envisioning the Future of the Extension Program Development Model

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This article synthesizes key points from this special issue of the Journal of Human Sciences and Extension and provides recommendations for and predictions about the evolution of the Extension Program Development Model. A foundational question addressed by each of the authors of this special issue and summarized in this chapter is, “If your recommendations regarding the Extension Program Development Model were followed, what would Extension look like in five years?”

Keywords: Extension, program development, applied research, visioning, program logic, stakeholder engagement, program evaluation, needs assessment, public value

This special issue of the *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension* closely examined the current state of the Cooperative Extension (Extension) program development model and provided a glimpse into Extension’s future through the eyes of both Extension professionals and researchers. This conclusion synthesizes key points from this special issue and offers recommendations for future Extension practice. The authors who contributed to this special issue were challenged to answer a central question, “If your recommendations regarding the Extension Program Development Model were followed, what would Extension look like in five years?” (Table 1 on pages 172-173).

Provide Public Good Through Assertive and Nimble Initiatives That Meet Local Needs

Extension provides critical programs to meet local, regional, state, and national needs. Extension has the power to take research-based information and disseminate it rapidly within a local context. When programming occurs at a local and culturally appropriate level, better programmatic outcomes tend to occur (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Extension professionals are often made aware of issues within a community context, and as a result, Extension is often poised to develop relevant programs and services. As Extension continues this important work,

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it must also articulate the impact of this work so the public (including relevant stakeholders and decision makers) understands how valuable Extension is (Franz, 2015). When the public understands the economic, environmental, and social good Extension provides to the communities it serves, programs have a deeper and more meaningful impact, and the organization is more fully supported.

Extension must continue to make bold advances in collaborative research with both the universities and communities they serve. Findings from pilot studies or ongoing programs should be more quickly disseminated to Extension practitioners so real time adaptations and modifications in programming can occur. This dissemination must occur outside of the *local* sphere and be disseminated at a national level. Tools such as Extension journals, professional conferences, eXtension, and other resources have proven successful for bridging research and practice. Furthermore, successful pilot programs must be transitioned into ongoing program offerings at the appropriate scale. Although flexibility and nimbleness are characteristics not often associated with large systems like Extension, these are the qualities that it must exhibit to be competitive in a connected, global society. When Extension stakeholders have quick and easy access to information via the Internet, Extension must demonstrate an ability to be timely and relevant.

Establish Program Logic in Support of the Extension Program Development Model

Research-based knowledge undergirds Extension programs. At the center of this process is the Extension Program Development Model (Seevers & Graham, 2012) that bridges program development and corresponding program evaluation. Establishing program logic, as a map of how we think our program works, is not only important, it is necessary. Umbrella models as proposed by Arnold (2015) offer an emerging approach for effectively modeling Extension programs that will help Extension move beyond foundational logic models to articulate program theories of change and action.

Our program models need to be dynamic rather than static, and grounded in current research and practice to best serve targeted stakeholders. For example, one community may need a very different version of an Extension program due to its needs, funding, or overall receptiveness to a particular program or intervention. In the future, we envision a renewed commitment to capacity development in support of program planning. This capacity development would help local educators understand and articulate program theory and action, and how to plan local programs under the umbrella model. Local educators would pay careful attention to the implementation of programs, taking responsibility for the program's theory of action, which local educators can best influence.

Table 1. Five-Year Projections from Special Issue Authors Regarding the Extension Program Development Model

Chapter	Key Points
Chapter 1: Changing Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extension systems articulate clearly and often their program development model and the value of using that model at the organizational, team, and individual levels by Extension educators and volunteers. • Our special issue of <i>JHSE</i> is used as an undergrad and graduate text for program development and Extension education courses, as well as presentations for the American Evaluation Association (AEA) and the National Association of Extension Program and Staff Development Professionals (NAEPSDP). • There is a more consistent and accurate definition of <i>program</i> used in Extension work.
Chapter 2: Ensuring Public Value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public value studies are conducted of key Extension programs (similar to <i>PROSPER</i> and Chazdon's Master Gardener studies). • Extension educators and administrators more fully engage program evaluators, communicators, researchers, and economists in measuring and articulating the public value of Extension programs. • Extension grant proposals require measuring and articulating the public value of the effort proposed.
Chapter 3: Needs Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extension needs assessment will reflect a conceptually coherent, logical, and well integrated plan. • Technology will be integrated into the design and implementation of Extension needs assessments supported by sufficient IT platforms. • Data visualization and representation will be a ubiquitous strategy for engaging stakeholders in Extension needs assessments. • Needs assessments, as well as assets, will be fully reflected in hybrid Extension needs assessment models.
Chapter 4: Program Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extension program areas would develop <i>umbrella models</i> built on current research and that articulate program theory of change and theory of action. • Local educators would use the umbrella models to plan their own programs. Doing so would ensure that all Extension programs in that area would be working toward a common set of outcomes, and would also provide the local educator a place to start, rather than building their local programs from scratch. • There would be renewed commitment to capacity development related to program planning. This capacity development would focus on helping local educators understand and articulate program theory and action, as well as how to plan local programs under the umbrella model. • Local educators would pay careful attention to the implementation of programs, taking responsibility for the program's theory of action, which is one thing the local educators have most control over.

Chapter 5: Program Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovations in Extension program delivery will be identified more rapidly. • Programs will be easier to both disseminate and replicate. • Extension programs will have a stronger emphasis towards evidence practice. • Programs will become both more locally orientated, but also nationally replicable due to the noting of programmatic adaptations and deviations.
Chapter 6: Program Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation would be a part of the natural cycle of program development in Extension. Evaluation would be part of the planning process from the beginning, during the needs assessment, planning, implementation (through process evaluation), and at the end (through summative evaluation). But it would not end there, the results of evaluation would provide feedback for strengthening the program which would then be adjusted, redesigned (if necessary), and re-implemented. In other words, it is a continuous cycle. • Extension evaluators would promote an approach to writing impact stories based on ideas of public value and informed by evaluation evidence. • Staff at all levels of Extension and their supervisors understand the value of and appreciate evaluation. As a result they view evaluation as critical to their success and actively pursue the development and use of standard evaluation methodologies with all work that they do. Extension programs are recognized for their excellence and rewarded for their accountability through continued and increased funding.
Chapter 7: Stakeholder Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid evolutions in communications technology, changing audience demographics, resource constraints, etc., will influence how Cooperative Extension engages public audiences. • Extension's delivery system will continually adapt in order to effectively engage new and existing audiences. • The number and types of stakeholders with which Extension organizations work will expand and include far more than those directly participating in programs.
Chapter 8: Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extension embraces the concept of life-long learning for our employees as we do for our clientele. • Extension embraces the involvement of our employees as stakeholders in the professional development process. • Extension embraces the use of multiple and various hybrid models of learning as it relates to professional development.
Chapter 9: Community- University Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extension fully embraces the engaged scholarship movement rather than ignoring it or seeing it as a competitor. • Extension embraces contemporary program delivery trends to expand program reach. • Extension program leaders and department chairs/heads integrate standards for assessing community-university engagement with the Extension Program Development Model.

Designing and Implementing Programs with Evaluation in Mind

Many Extension programmers are guilty of *under-resourcing* program evaluation. The work of Nichols, Blake, Chazdon, and Radhakrishna (2015) suggests that when programs are planned with evaluation in mind, the results of these evaluations are often more useful to those delivering the program. More importantly, evaluation contributes to a cyclical process of consistent programmatic improvement that better serves Extension communities. This emphasis on program evaluation as a part of the program process enhances an orientation in Extension towards evidence-based practices and an appreciation of evaluation at multiple levels of Extension professionals. When evaluation is *useful* rather than required, professional buy-in to a program's evaluation can be enhanced.

Program adaptation is a hallmark of effective Extension practice. The field of Extension education has long acknowledged that local needs should take precedence over *checking boxes* that a program was followed to the letter. Reconciling the need to deliver evidence-based programs with that of specific groups and communities is directly associated with the process of program implementation. In Extension programming, it is important not only to measure what outcomes a program achieved, but also to what degree a program was delivered as designed. When we understand what went well (and for that matter what did not) while a program was being delivered, we can make *real time* decisions about program adaptation to ensure our participants are receiving the very best program possible (Gagnon, Franz, Garst, & Bumpus, 2015). Given the increasing attention focused on how specific program outcomes are achieved, greater attention to program implementation positions Extension to build stronger programs, as well as intentionally guide program outcomes. Noting and understanding these adaptations will help to further real time program modification, and thus enhance the experiences of Extension program participants and those delivering the programs.

Balance Research Needs for All Stakeholders

While statically rigorous research designs and findings may communicate program virtues within the research community, such methods may mean little to community stakeholders involved in the decision making process. We must attempt to fully uncover who we serve. As highlighted in the work of French and Morse (2015), in Extension, we often fail to recognize all of the populations we serve, whether information is discovered from a quick web search or a phone call to an Extension professional. Furthermore, as we balance gold-standard research with real-world Extension settings, we must become comfortable with and confident in the language and practice of applied research. The dissemination of information can no longer go the traditional route of much Extension work—the development and evaluation of a local program, only communicated to a local group. Social media must be fully embraced alongside a rapidly changing audience with differing resource constraints, the audience we serve may no longer communicate through

traditional channels. An eye towards being both consistent and contemporary must be aimed inward on the Extension community. Our workforce should better reflect the demographics of the communities we serve. Additionally, it should no longer be considered acceptable to halfheartedly embrace rapidly changing communication platforms (such as social media). Extension should be leading this area in innovation rather than catching up.

Extension researchers and professionals must continue to acknowledge that Extension work often takes place in an applied setting, therefore navigating both the real and the research worlds.

Program evaluation must remain adaptable to these changes, while remaining methodologically robust to continue to elevate the quality of research conducted in Extension settings (Nichols et al., 2015). Although it may be a difficult balance to acquire and maintain, it is a necessary challenge.

Future Directions

Throughout its history, Extension has pursued relevance—a pursuit that has reflected respect for tradition, as well as a desire for innovation. Although our field is imperfect, and we have many opportunities to grow, our ability to recognize these flaws, and more importantly, our continuous efforts to correct them, demonstrate the continued relevance of Extension for the next 100 years. To be successful as a field of compelling research and practice, we must continue to implement programs and educational services that serve our constituents at their level. We must do this by thinking beyond public television, face-to-face workshops, and printed newsletters; we must further embrace current and future technologies to remain relevant in the eyes of stakeholders.

As we build upon the legacy of those who created the field of Extension, we recognize that they worked in a very different paradigm than we do today. Our field faces pressure from all sides to do more with less; we cannot allow for innovation to be stymied by bureaucratic limitations. We need to enable our front line professionals to identify, act on, and solve problems. More importantly, we must allow them to fail upwards, as failure often serves as a strong foundation for future success.

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