

2-1-2005

## A Call for Visionary Leadership

Chester P. Fehlis

*Texas Cooperative Extension, The Texas A&M University System, c-fehlis@tamu.edu*



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

---

### Recommended Citation

Fehlis, C. P. (2005). A Call for Visionary Leadership. *The Journal of Extension*, 43(1), Article 2.  
<https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol43/iss1/2>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Extension by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact [kokeefe@clemson.edu](mailto:kokeefe@clemson.edu).



February 2005 // Volume 43 // Number 1 // Commentary // 1COM1

PREVIOUS ARTICLE ISSUE CONTENTS NEXT ARTICLE POST A COMMENT

0

## A Call for Visionary Leadership

### Abstract

A bright future for Extension depends upon having leaders selected for their visionary thinking and guided by nationally defined standards for excellence. Visionary leadership is essential at all levels of the land-grant university system. Just as important is a vision for Extension's potential, unconstrained by limited experience with Extension or knowledge only of Extension's past accomplishments. The development of a clear vision, along with accepted metrics for excellence, will enable our 76 land-grant institutions to successfully advance into the future as a system.

### Chester P. Fehlis

Director Emeritus  
Texas Cooperative Extension, The Texas A&M University System  
College Station, Texas  
[c-fehlis@tamu.edu](mailto:c-fehlis@tamu.edu)

During a new employee forum, a young county agent asked compelling questions that merit thought throughout the Cooperative Extension System. He asked, "What is the future for Extension? Will Extension still exist in 30 to 40 years so that I might hope to retire?"

I responded that our future can be significantly affected by each of us--by how well we do our job, how we listen and respond to the real issues facing our clientele, and whether we remember that we work for the people--and that the people ultimately decide if Extension will continue to exist.

As I pondered further, I realized there is a more specific question to ask: Do we have the visionary leadership in Extension and in this land-grant university system that is necessary to carry forward our success of the last 90 years and achieve even greater success in future years?

## The Value of Visionary Leadership

A plan to exist 40 years from now will require much more than each individual worker expertly and precisely driving a spike in the rail. The real issue is whether anyone knows where the rail is heading and why it is heading in that direction.

Leadership is unquestionably the key factor in determining if Extension will be capable of synthesizing future changes in demographics, science, technology, educational models, and human needs, and then developing a very clear and specific vision for our system.

The futurist John Scharr is quoted as saying (Hempel, 1996), "The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made, and the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destinations."

The future for Extension is what we create through leaders who have a vision for what Extension might look like, how we will function, and how we will serve the needs of our customers. Visionary leaders must know where we are going and why we are going in that direction.

Visionary thinking has been recognized for thousands of years. It is described in biblical statements such as, "where there is no vision, the people perish." The Constitution of the United States, written over 200 years ago, is based on a vision of freedom for the people. That vision was so remarkable that our Constitution has withstood the challenges of time and is still valid today as a vision for democracy.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was one of the truly great visionaries of the 20th century. In his "I Have A Dream" speech delivered in August 1963, he clearly and eloquently described his vision of a world without discrimination--a vision that still inspires our world's quest for freedom for all people. Without vision and dreams, a people, a nation, a business, or an organization has no means to create a positive future because the paths lead nowhere and every day there is a new path.

## **The Selection of Leaders in the Land-Grant University System**

A positive future for Extension depends upon having visionary leaders at all levels. It depends upon selecting individuals as director, vice president, president, or chancellor not just on their professional vitae of past accomplishments, but upon the careful analysis of their visionary leadership skills. Our future depends upon the leaders of these land-grant universities learning from Extension's past achievements, but not allowing our future success to be hampered or held hostage by the past.

We must have leaders who recognize that Extension has a broad mission to serve the educational needs of the people. Leaders who recognize that the changes affecting our society also affect the Extension mission. Leaders who know that the demands of our state legislators, commissioners, courts, and local people expand our opportunities for educational progress beyond traditional programming efforts.

We cannot have leaders who constrain Extension to serving only production agriculture and to working only in rural areas. The vision for Extension must parallel the needs of our nation; the vision must recognize both the basic, traditional needs and the ever-evolving needs of our society in a rapidly changing, diverse world. We need leaders with the astuteness to recognize the value of faculty contributions to traditional needs, but also to openly reward faculty who effectively respond to the needs of our dynamic society.

The risk of successful, innovative, creative, and visionary Extension educational programs reverting to mediocracy in our country is real. People placed in government and university leadership roles who are not visionary and whose only knowledge of the Extension system is from the past can pose a threat that ultimately contributes to the demise of Extension.

Decisions on the selection of individuals to lead Extension programs, those who supervise the Extension director and the placement of Extension in the university structure, should be among the most crucial a university president or chancellor makes. Extension remains the "front door" to the university for the majority of people and presents a tremendous opportunity to create a positive image of the visionary university that most presidents seek.

## **Defining Excellence as a Guide for Leaders**

The questions asked at orientation by the new county agent also should stimulate another question. Once we establish a clear vision for Extension nationally, how will we define excellence in Extension?

How do we define excellence in Extension to a university president, a chancellor, a dean, a vice president, a faculty member from another college, our state legislatures, Congress, and our constituents? What are the metrics that define excellence in our state and national Extension system?

Various reports annually rank universities and academic programs within universities based on a set of common metrics. Presidents recognize these metrics and know what they must do to strive for excellence, and department heads and faculty clearly understand what it takes to be the best in a particular discipline.

In Extension, however, every institution has self-defined metrics. There are no mutual metrics that nationally define the best, or even the top 10. In my work nationally with the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, I discovered that every Extension director believes that his or her state's Extension program is in the top five or 10 in the country. That may be good for our egos, but it is not good for Extension. That alone may prevent many state Extension programs and our national system from going from "good to great," as Jim Collins challenges us to do in his best selling book (2001).

In the document, *The Extension System, A Vision for the 21st Century* (ECOP, 2002), we are advised to ensure that organizational decisions in the states are consistent with the 21st century vision. The decisions must also be consistent with a national vision that supports defined characteristics of excellence that will help us and any dean, president, or chancellor to pursue that vision.

Extension is one of the few nationwide organizations or businesses that does not have defined metrics for success. How can a new administrator, especially one from outside Extension, have any idea of what vision they should have for excellence in the state Extension program if there are no established metrics?

I fully realize the risks associated with establishing metrics for our system, but we must also recognize the risks of not establishing these metrics. If one state rewards faculty for expanding

Extension into the homes of millions of urban residents while another state criticizes faculty for the same work, then we are a system destined for failure. Creativity, innovation, use of technology, and the packaging of complete educational programs for diverse audiences are metrics that I have used to reward faculty in Texas.

In mid-2004, we hired a new Extension specialist to help improve our accountability and determine the economic impact of major educational programs. I anticipate that this will help us create new metrics on the relevance of many of our programs, while helping us to thoughtfully justify programs where economic impact is difficult to assess.

I shaped the metrics for Texas Cooperative Extension based on more than 35 years of experience working in Extension. Yet I am not confident that those metrics truly support a national vision for excellence. I do recognize that some metrics are unique to some states. But I believe there are enough common metrics that define excellence in the Extension system such that a clear vision can evolve of where we are going and how to get us there. This effort would take tremendous courage on the part of ECOP and our federal partner, but without it, we are perceived not as a system, but merely as some 76 institutions all heading in different directions.

I believe that there has never been a time in our history when Extension has been more relevant than it is today or will be through the 21st century. But our relevance can only be realized if the call for visionary leadership is answered.

**View reader comments for this Commentary in the [JOE Discussion Forum](#). (This forum is no longer accepting new entries.)**

## References

Collins, J. (2001). *Good to great: Why some companies make the leap--and others don't*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

Hempel, L. C. (1996). *Environmental governance: The global challenge*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press.

King, M. L., Jr. (1963). I have a dream. (Speech at the march on Washington for jobs and freedom). 88th Cong., 109 Cong. Rec. 16241 (1963).

National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC), Extension Committee on Organization and Policy. (2002). *The Extension system: A vision for the 21st century*. Available at: [http://www.nasulgc.org/publications/Agriculture/ECOP2002\\_Vision.pdf](http://www.nasulgc.org/publications/Agriculture/ECOP2002_Vision.pdf)

*The Holy Bible*, King James Version. (1999). New York: American Bible Society. Bartleby.com, (2000). Available at: <http://www.bartleby.com/108/>

