

2-1-2005

County-Level Extension Programming: Continuity and Change in the Alabama Cooperative Extension System

Laura Robinson

Auburn University, robinl2@auburn.edu

Mark Dubois

Auburn University, duboimr@auburn.edu

Conner Bailey

Auburn University, cbailey@ag.auburn.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

Robinson, L., Dubois, M., & Bailey, C. (2005). County-Level Extension Programming: Continuity and Change in the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. *The Journal of Extension*, 43(1), Article 13.
<https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol43/iss1/13>

This Research in Brief 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.



February 2005 // Volume 43 // Number 1 // Research in Brief // 1RIB3



PREVIOUS
ARTICLE



ISSUE
CONTENTS



NEXT
ARTICLE



County-Level Extension Programming: Continuity and Change in the Alabama Cooperative Extension System

Abstract

Production agriculture is no longer a dominant feature of Alabama's rural life. Forestry and natural resource issues have emerged as significant concerns expressed by County Advisory Boards designed to help shape county-level Extension programming in Alabama. Our findings indicate that county-level Extension programming continues to put greater emphasis on traditional agricultural programs than on forestry and natural resources even though County Advisory Boards considered the latter issues to have greater priority. We examine the potential causes for the continued dominance of traditional programs in Alabama and conclude that initiatives to change program priorities are unlikely to begin at the county level.

Laura Robinson

Research Associate
School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences
robinl2@auburn.edu

Mark Dubois

Extension Specialist/Associate Professor
School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences
duboimr@auburn.edu

Conner Bailey

Professor
Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology
bailelc@auburn.edu

Auburn University
Auburn, Alabama

Introduction

The United States Cooperative Extension Service (Extension) was created in 1914 to "aid in diffusing . . . useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture and home economics" (Rasmussen, 1989:153). The declining farm and rural population has created a dilemma for Extension. Some clients, agents, and stakeholders argue Extension should maintain its focus on farms and rural America. Most clients, agents, and stakeholders agree that for Extension to survive it must change with the times and broaden its mission (Black, Howe, Howell, & Bedker, 1992; Conone, 1991; Adelaine & Foster, 1990; Johnsrud & Rauschkolb, 1989; Meier, 1989; Hildreth & Armbruster, 1981; Boone & Kincaid, 1966).

Extension programs are deeply rooted in agriculture and are, therefore, difficult to change. Extension programs, staff, and volunteers have strong ties to production agriculture, contributing to a slow rate of change.

Alabama has a long agrarian history marked by a steady decline since 1950 in number of farms and farmed acres. Much of the farmland has reverted to natural forest or has been planted in pines. Alabama forest acres grew by 1 million acres to 22.9 million acres between 1990 and 2000 (Hartsell & Brown, 2002). This compares with 9 million acres of farmland in 2000 (Alabama Agricultural Statistics Service, 2002). Over 80% of all commercial timber land in Alabama is controlled by 445,500 non-industrial private forest owners (NIPF) (USDA Forest Service 2001). The vast majority of these are individuals who own small parcels and may have needs for the type of

expertise that the Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) could provide (Bliss, Sisock & Birch, 1998; Zhang, Warren & Bailey, 1998).

Given the growing importance of forestry as an industry and some evidence that residents-clients were concerned about natural resource and environmental quality (Bliss, Nepal, Brooks, & Larson, 1994), we wanted to see if these concerns were being transmitted to county Extension offices and, if so, how this affected local Extension programming. Our research was motivated by recognition that staffing within ACES did not reflect the declining importance of agriculture or the increasing importance of forestry and natural resources, including the needs of NIPF owners.

Methods

Both primary and secondary data were used in our study. Secondary data included reports of County Advisory Boards and Program Advisory Committees and the allocation of time by county agents. Annually, each of Alabama's 67 counties is to have a County Advisory Board that is asked to identify issues of widespread concern for Extension to address. In contrast, Program Advisory Committees are focused on particular "base" program areas. We requested data on County Advisory Boards and Program Advisory Committees from all county Extension offices. We received usable data from 42 counties (63%) on County Advisory Boards and from 39 counties (58%) on Program Advisory Committees. Both County Advisory Boards and Program Advisory Committees represent citizen input, but their make-up and focus differ.

The allocation of effort by county agents is documented through self-reporting at the beginning of each year. Data for this study are from 2000 and were obtained from ACES. ACES personnel estimate, with approval of County Coordinator and District Supervisor, what portion of time in the coming year they expect to devote to various activities listed under Extension Team Projects. Data reflect both intended and approved allocation of time on the part of county agents and therefore the relative priority of program areas.

These secondary data were used to select four representative counties for more detailed investigations. Two of the four counties selected appeared to have a disconnect between what was identified by the County Advisory Board as a major issue of concern and the programs that were being implemented based on Extension Team Project data. In the two remaining counties, County Advisory Board priorities and county Extension programs had substantial overlap.

Primary data were collected using semi-structured interviews with members of County Advisory Boards, Program Advisory Committees, and Extension personnel. Interviews were conducted with 13 ACES staff, 10 county level and 3 state level. County Extension Coordinators in each county provided names and phone numbers for members of the County Advisory Boards. A total of 33 interviews were conducted (64% of all County Advisory Board members in these four counties). Face-to-face interviews ranged from 20 to 120 minutes. A set of common open-ended questions was used for these interviews, allowing for respondents to expand on their answers, an approach that often yielded valuable information. These primary data were useful in understanding local dynamics of Extension programming, but also helped us understand the limits of available secondary data.

Secondary Data

Figure 1 presents a normative (expected) model of how Extension programming at the county level should take place (Robinson, 2001). Figure 2 presents a summary of the purpose, members, and meetings of the County Advisory Board, Program Advisory Committee, and Extension Team Projects.

Figure 1.

Expected Relationship Between County Advisory Boards, Program Advisory Committees, Extension Team Projects, and Extension Agents in County-level Programming

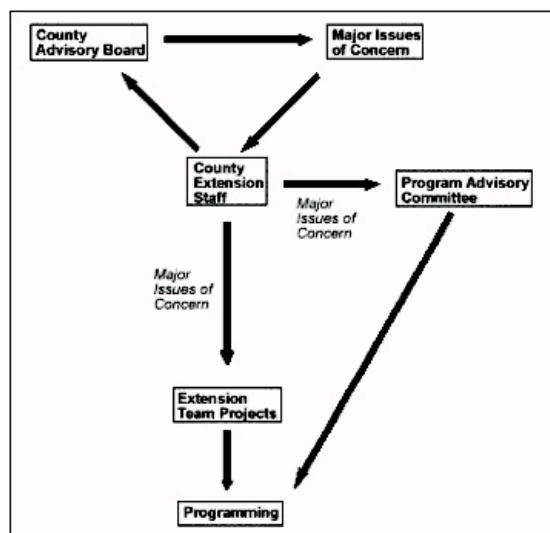


Figure 2.

Purpose, Members, and Meetings of the County Advisory Board, Program Advisory Committee, and Extension Team Projects

	County Advisory Board¹	Program Advisory Committee²	Extension Team Projects³
Purpose or Mission	Identify critical issues that affect the county	Individuals with a common interest in traditional program area Extension has committed to address	Categories of activities under which Extension employees report how they intend to allocate their time
Members	Cross-section of formal and informal community leaders	Cross-section of community leaders with general knowledge in program area	Not groups that meet, but program areas county agents and specialists identify as important
Frequency of Meetings	3-6 times per year	Determined by county-level Extension staff	Not committees or groups that meet
Source: 1(ACES, 1999a), 2(ACES, 1999b), 3(ACES, 1997)			

According to the County Advisory Board Handbook (ACES, 1999a, p. 2), the mission of the County Advisory Boards is to aid local Extension staff by identifying issues of widespread public concern within the county and helping local staff decide which of these issues should be addressed through Extension programs.

Members of the County Advisory Board should include both formal and informal leaders of the community and represent a cross-section of race, ethnic, gender, economic strata, and occupations. In general, the County Advisory Board is to meet three to six times a year (ACES, 1999a). Their primary responsibility is to identify "critical issues and problems that affect the economic, physical, and social well-being of the county residents" (ACES, 1999a, p. 2). A review of available County Advisory Board reports (42 of 67 Alabama counties) indicates that family issues (83%), natural resources (71%), and agriculture (50%) were the concerns most often expressed (Robinson, 2001).

Program Advisory Committees are "organized groups of individuals with a common interest in a specific issue of widespread, local concern that Extension has committed to address" (ACES, 1999b, p. 2). County-level Extension staff determine how many Program Advisory Committees are needed, the number of people to serve on specific Program Advisory Committees, how often they meet, and their structure. County agents rely on Program Advisory Committees to ensure that "base" programs stay relevant and meet needs of their clientele. Program Advisory Committee members help county agents obtain resources--facilities, equipment, program-specific donations--needed to carry out programs. Also, Program Advisory Committee members assist agents in implementing and evaluating certain educational programs (ACES, 1999b).

Members should be community leaders who have a general knowledge of the program area within which they have volunteered. Like County Advisory Boards, Program Advisory Committee members must represent a cross-section of race, age, sex, economic strata, skills, and knowledge levels. Secondary data were available on Program Advisory Committees for 39 counties. All but two counties (95%) had Program Advisory Committees related to agriculture, compared to 69% for family issues and 38% for natural resource issues (Robinson, 2001).

Extension Team Projects were created in 1997 to replace individual plans of work and to better facilitate organized teamwork within ACES. An Extension Team Project is defined as "a series of related activities which take place over a specified period of time (usually several years), and which involve several Extension-funded employees working together to accomplish specific objectives" (ACES, 1997, p. 2). Extension Team Projects are not committees or groups that meet, but rather are program areas that individual county agents and specialists identify as important to their assignments.

County agents are required to allocate a minimum of 50% (116 days) of their time to one or more Extension Team Projects. The remaining days should be allocated to "non-project work." For this project, the amount of time dedicated to specific Extension Team Projects was defined as the amount of time spent working in that program area and focus of county-level Extension programming. Family issues were the largest (45%) single program area as defined by Extension

Team Projects, followed by agriculture and 4-H (38.5% combined), and natural resources (6.2%) (Robinson, 2001). The emphasis on family issues is explained by federal funding tied strictly to such programs as the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program.

Analysis of secondary data suggests that there is a disconnect between (1) the major issues of concern identified by County Advisory Boards and (2) where county-level Extension personnel devote their time and energy (as measured by involvement in various Extension Team Projects). In particular, these data indicate that the continuing emphasis on traditional agriculture and 4-H programs and the far more limited attention devoted to natural resource issues is at some variance to recommendations by County Advisory Boards across the state.

Primary Data

Primary data from interviews with County Advisory Board members and Extension personnel from the four study counties suggest that the disconnect may not be as sharply defined as the secondary data indicate. County Advisory Board members interviewed expressed no dissatisfaction with Extension programming. To the contrary, they expressed the view that certain major issues of concern are "timeless" in nature and not easily resolved (e.g., unemployment, poor parenting skills, and such youth issues as drugs, alcohol, and teen pregnancy). They indicated that their role was not to be directly involved in program definition and development but rather with broad-brush scoping of challenges facing their particular county.

This is at some variance to the official position on this matter (ACES, 1999a). The County Advisory Board handbook states that the County Advisory Board's primary mission is to identify issues of widespread public concern in the county and help the local staff determine which issues should be addressed through Extension programs (ACES, 1999a). Both primary and secondary data indicate that County Advisory Boards are not instrumental in shaping county-level Extension programming.

Interview data indicated that county Extension staff rely primarily on Program Advisory Committees to identify program needs. By definition, Program Advisory Committees are linked to certain "base" program areas, historically defined as 4-H and production agriculture. Local members of Program Advisory Committees are likely to be associated with various agricultural commodity groups or other influential organizations with a clear interest in ACES continuing to serve the needs of agricultural interests. Nine county-level Extension staff interviewed had degrees either from Auburn University or Alabama A&M University, both land-grant universities. Eight had degrees in traditional Extension areas of agriculture or home economics. This pattern of staffing is consistent nationally (Terry, 1995).

Interviews with Extension personnel at the county level indicated that Extension Team Projects may not represent an accurate reflection of the work they do. County agents respond to needs of residents, and predicting what those needs will be involves more art than science. Extension Team Projects were designed to encourage interaction among Extension personnel (e.g., between university-based specialists and county agents) to address common problems.

From the perspective of ACES headquarters, a common planning framework for all employees makes sense in defining interests and coordinating activities. From the perspective of the county agent, however, Extension Team Projects may be seen simply as another form of reporting not unlike the annual work plans that the Extension Team Projects were designed to replace. In short, conclusions based on a strict interpretation of Extension Team Projects as reflective of county agent program activities need to be approached with caution.

These caveats aside, our research suggests that Extension programming at the county level emphasizes traditional programs in agriculture and 4-H. The question is why this emphasis instead of forestry, natural resources, and community development.

Discussion

There is a substantial literature on Extension's continued linkage to agriculture. To this literature we offer a modest contribution by focusing specifically at county-level Extension programming. Terry (1995) noted that most county agents in the U.S. studied agricultural disciplines at land-grant universities, a pattern reflected in the staffing of ACES as well.

As they began their careers, county agents found a ready clientele and well-organized support groups. In Alabama this support is institutionalized in the form of the Program Advisory Committees. County-level Extension personnel look to Program Advisory Committees for primary guidance in program development. Compared to the County Advisory Boards, whose guidance tends to be broad in scope, Program Advisory Committees have well defined goals and are focused on deliverable outcomes. The combination of organized support and program clarity is understandably attractive to county agents who depend on local funding for a portion of their operational budget.

Both primary and secondary data collected in this study reflect the continued dominance of agriculture in ACES programming at the county level. Normative description of County Advisory Boards and Extension Team Projects do not match how they are operationalized in practice. Interpretation of secondary data based on normative definitions is misleading. County Advisory

Boards do not appear to play an effective role in Extension program development at the county level. As a result, ACES resources have the potential to be disproportionately devoted to traditional programs in agriculture and 4-H. The comparative strength of ACES programs related to family issues such as nutrition is directly related to federal funds earmarked for those purposes.

While these needs are being met, needs of citizens whose concerns involve natural resource and environmental protection or community development remain unmet. Well over 100 citizen groups in Alabama have been formed out of concern for natural resource and environmental issues <www.ag.auburn.edu/grassroots>, but few have any connection to ACES (Bailey, Walton, Merritt, & Dubois, 2000). Of the 445,500 non-industrial private forest landowners, many own small tracts of forestland and would benefit from ACES programming in the areas of timber management and marketing (USDA Forest Service, 2001).

Conclusion

Changing institutional direction is a slow process. Vested interests and institutional cultures represent conservative forces in the gradual transformation of Extension in the United States. In this article we have examined the dynamics of such change at the county level in Alabama. Federal funding to support programming in family well-being has led to substantial investment of effort into this new program area. In an era of budgetary constraints, expanding program efforts in new directions will have an immediate and negative impact on established programs. Resistance is to be expected. Yet if Extension is going to continue to meet the needs of citizens in the United States, some redirection of effort will be necessary. Our research suggests that such initiatives are unlikely to begin at the county level.

Acknowledgement

The research reported upon here was supported by the USDA's National Research Initiative Competitive Grants Program (Rural Development).

References

- Adelaine, M. & Foster, R. (1990). Who really influences Extension direction? *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 28(4). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1990winter/a1.html>
- Alabama Agricultural Statistics Service. (2002). Alabama agricultural statistics. Bulletin 44. Montgomery: Alabama Agricultural Statistics Service.
- ACES (Alabama Cooperative Extension System). (1999a). Alabama Cooperative Extension System county advisory board handbook.
- ACES. (1999b). Alabama Cooperative Extension System program advisory committee handbook.
- ACES. (1997). *Extension team projects*. Retrieved October 11, 2000, from <http://www.aces.edu/department/acesadm/plan/explan.htm>
- Bailey, C., Walton, B., Merritt, L., & Dubois, M. (2000). Green groups as clients; Opportunities for ACES. *Action; Public Issue Information for Alabama Citizens*. Spring 2000. Auburn: Alabama Cooperative Extension System.
- Black, D. C., Howe, G. W., Howell, D. L., & Bedker, P. (1992). Selecting advisory council members. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 30(1). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1992spring/a4.html>
- Bliss, J. C., Sisock, M. L., & Birch, T. W. (1998). Ownership matters: Forestland concentration in rural Alabama. *Society and Natural Resources*, 11, 401-410.
- Bliss, J. C., Nepal, S. K., Brooks, R. T., Jr. & Larson, M. D. (1994). Forestry community or grandfalloon?: Do forest owners share the public's views? *Journal of Forestry*, 92(9), 6-10.
- Boone, E. J., & Kincaid, J., Jr. (1966). Historical perspective of the programming function. In H. C. Sanders (Ed.) *The Cooperative Extension Service*. (pp. 89-93) Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Conone, R. M. (1991). People listening to people. . .or are we really? *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 29(3). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1991fall/f1.html>
- Hartsell, A. J., & Brown, M. J. (2002). Forest statistics for Alabama, 2000. Resource Bulletin SRS-67. Asheville, N.C.: Southern Research Station, USDA Forest Service.
- Hildreth, R. J. & Armbruster, W. J. (1981). Extension program delivery--Past, present, and future: An overview. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 63, 853-858.
- Johnsrud, M. D., & Rauschkolb, R. S. (1989). Extension in transition: Review and renewal. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 27(1). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1989spring/tp1.html>
- Meier, H. A. (1989). Extension trends and directions. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 27(3). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1989fall/a3.html>

Rasmussen, W. D. (1989). *Taking the University to the people--Seventy-five years of Cooperative Extension*. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press.

Robinson, L. (2001). Examination of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System's county level programming. M.S. Thesis in Rural Sociology, Auburn University. December 2001.

Terry, L. D. (1995). Cooperative Extension's urban expansion: The default of leadership or responsiveness to changing times? *Administration & Society*, 27, 54-81.

United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service (2001). Alabama State and Private Forestry Fact Sheet. Site Accessed May, 24, 2004. <http://www.fs.fed.us/spf/coop/states/al.pdf>

Zhang, D., Warren S., & Bailey, C. (1998). The role of assistance foresters in nonindustrial private forest management: Alabama landowners' perspectives. *Southern Journal of Applied Forestry*, 22(2), 101-105.

Copyright © by Extension Journal, Inc. ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the *Journal Editorial Office*, joe-ed@joe.org.

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#)