Futuring: The Implementation of Anticipatory Excellence

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Abstract
In the 21st century, futuring, the use of techniques to anticipate potential public issues, will give Extension the time needed to address emerging real-world issues before crises occur. Where do our current efforts fall short? We excel in planning, yet futuring can provide us options for change using anticipatory techniques to inform continual improvement. Futuring, timely and proactive planning tied to meaningful engagement with the people in each state, will result in Extension becoming "the catalyst for connecting people to the wealth of relevant knowledge and research residing within various colleges and disciplines of the university."

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Introduction

In the 21st century, futuring, the use of techniques to anticipate potential public issues, will give Extension the time needed to address emerging real-world issues before crises occur. Extension's programming will become increasingly relevant, and the people of each state will desire engagement with their land-grant university. Learning will be valued because Extension programs will be linked directly to the learning, discovery, and engagement missions of the land-grant university.

The resources of the university will be readily available when learners desire to learn because we will have the processes in place that allow us to out-think and out-anticipate competitors. This cutting-edge advantage will draw residents of the state to Extension programming because they will find it meaningful and timely.

Where Current Efforts Fall Short

Some may conjure a vision of a fortuneteller with a crystal ball when they think of futuring, but in the 21st century, futuring has become a respected science. This is evidenced by the fact that our nation's military community is highly effective in anticipating issues that inform strategies for the defense of our country. Some companies develop futuring newsletters and use anticipatory techniques to give the organization advantages in dealing with fast-paced change. Their goal is to enable company leaders and employees to stay on the cutting edge so that flexibility is expected for quick changes in a direction that will ensure viability.

Futuring is not planning, but it overlaps with the first step in program development. Futuring follows the anticipatory techniques of:

1. Scanning and monitoring the environment;

2. Analyzing internal and external assumptions;

3. Creating multiple scenarios around emerging issue areas;

4. Developing forecasts;

5. Writing issue briefs;

6. Assuring program champions, faculty, and staff who are ready to address predicted changes; and,

7. Using the results of futuring to inform continual improvement.

Most Extension units skip steps 2-7. Extension often scans the environment, but this valuable information may not exist in a usable form that makes it easy to access. Even current data-based information is unlikely to be linked to ongoing learner input and local stakeholder listening results. Extension frequently relies on experts who can talk about potentials, yet many of these experts do not feel comfortable with providing scenarios, forecasts, or issue briefs.

Often workshops focus on one aspect of futuring. Creating scenarios, without the entire sequence of techniques, does little to inform planning. By incorporating all of the steps for futuring, the results can be reported in a format that can be used electronically to inform research, Extension programming, funding partners, and the public.

It may surprise you to find that there are networks of university partners developing futuring techniques while collaborating with leaders who cross the public, private, and corporate world. Some of these networks have become learning organizations stretching across the United States and the globe. It will be worth your time to look at futuring organizations and their Web sites to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the critical importance of anticipatory futuring techniques. The following are examples of companies and public alliances that value futuring results.

- Rand has a Web site that highlights futuring issue briefs in their priority areas. These briefs are frequently highlighted on their front page. See: http://www.rand.org/

- The International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis headquartered in Vienna, Austria conducts studies of futuring related to global change. See http://www.iiasa.ac.at/docs/what-is-iiasa.html?sb=2

- The Technology Source, hosted by Michigan Virtual University, created a learning community around anticipatory management of technology. See http://ts.mivu.org/

John D. Bransford, a cognitive theorist at Peabody College, Vanderbilt University, has researched intuition and expertise. He found that intuition (knowing without having to determine how it is known) comes from attaining a high level of expertise in an area or discipline that result in refined and nearly instant pattern recognition skills.

The term "anticipation" has been used in the field of leadership development to encourage leaders to develop early pattern recognition of issues in a culture of change so they can lead timely action. I think of that old television show called, *Name That Tune*. Some contestants could not think of the name of the tune even after the entire tune was played. Others knew the name of the tune after hearing only four or five notes. The contestants who knew the tune by hearing only a few notes were experts who had mastered this field and had expert pattern recognition for songs. They were instantly anticipating the next note and quickly identifying the correct tune.

This instant pattern recognition can be improved as we practice futuring. We will become more effective leaders in a culture of change, and we will more effectively engage learners in relevant and meaningful education when and where they desire to learn.

It's Time to Put Theory into Action

Extension has all of the tools needed in order to implement futuring as a viable precursor to planning. Most state land-grant colleges have the technological resources to move from merely analyzing trends to projecting anticipated futures. Many states have access to science-based social, economic, environmental, technological, and political information that is needed to anticipate likely scenarios, develop forecasts, and write issue briefs. This kind of information synthesis can continually inform situational analysis and allow Extension educators to quickly change direction when fast-paced changes occur.

Extension's preparation for development and updating a stakeholder-based program is built on the accuracy of situational data, its relevancy, and the timeliness of implementation. The organizational strategic direction and its priority programs are built upon the organization's expertise to continually and accurately interpret the needs and aspirations of learners. These broad areas include social, technological, economic, environmental, and political sectors. Futuring is critical to being prepared and becoming flexible, timely, and highly valued.

The Land-Grant Association's Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) re-organized at the beginning of 2003. The final report of the ECOP Strategic Planning Council recommended that the Extension System "embrace and use futuring to guide changes moving beyond the traditional mode of operating to a more visionary and anticipatory mode." In the new structure, ECOP chose to make futuring a primary function of the directors serving on ECOP. The reorganization of ECOP provides an opportunity to view the world differently. This change holds

potential for facilitating timely and meaningful change for the Cooperative Extension System as well as its diverse stakeholders. They, too, believe it is an important process that cannot simply be delegated to others.

Summary

James Morrison and William C. Ashley say that change is no longer a characteristic of organizations; change is the essence of the organization. This means that futuring for Extension is critical for effective anticipatory decision-making, continual yet timely improvements, and strategic plans that frame valued programs.

Futuring in the Extension System should inform programming, shape system-wide recruitment and staffing, enable new strategic alliances, and be accessible through a data-driven intelligence system available to the entire system. The Extension System has the tools for conducting quality futuring. Our challenge is to realize futuring is not the same as planning. Futuring results in environment intelligence, likely scenarios, forecasts, and issue briefs so that as an Extension System we are prepared to successfully embrace emerging issues and are flexible enough to prepare learners and communities for timely action.

Historically, our world was more predictable and Extension was focused on problem solving. If the Extension culture continues to wait to respond until after a problem becomes complex, our ability to address fast-paced issues and challenges will be restricted, and many of our efforts will be out of date. In the future, decision-making must be timely, framed within a global context, and based upon multiple dynamic and complex scenarios.

Futuring, informed and available through an electronic data driven intelligence system, is key to Extension remaining relevant and viable. Effective futuring will lead to:

- Higher quality decision-making.
- Shifting from reactive to proactive modes to anticipate change.
- More effective and timely framing, valuing, and ranking of program priorities.
- Positioning current and future assets to address emerging issues.

We celebrate the milestones of past successes, such as the 100th anniversary of Seaman A. Knapp's work that gave rise to the Extension System. We celebrate the 40th anniversary of the *Journal of Extension*, its 10th anniversary as an electronic journal, and the scholarship it has fostered nationwide. Now, it is also appropriate that we turn toward the future and embrace the techniques that will position us for excellence and viability building on our successful heritage.

The impact and consequences of decision-making today will frame success for future generations. Ultimately, the Extension System as well as stakeholders will be better prepared to shape their own destiny. Futuring, timely and proactive planning tied to meaningful engagement with the people in each state, will result in Extension becoming "the catalyst for connecting people to the wealth of relevant knowledge and research residing within various colleges and disciplines of the university" (NASULGC, 2002, Page 2).

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