

10-1-2004

## Perceptions of the Cooperative Extension Service: A Community Resource for Youth and Family Programs

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### Recommended Citation

Mincemoyer, C., Perkins, D., & Lillehoj, C. (2004). Perceptions of the Cooperative Extension Service: A Community Resource for Youth and Family Programs. *The Journal of Extension*, 42(5), Article 8. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol42/iss5/8>

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## Perceptions of the Cooperative Extension Service: A Community Resource for Youth and Family Programs

### Abstract

PROSPER (**PRO**moting **S**chool-community-university **P**artnerships to **E**nhance **R**esilience) is a prevention partnership involving the Cooperative Extension Service (CES), local schools, and community agencies. PROSPER collaborative teams were formed in 14 communities in Iowa and 14 in Pennsylvania to address risk reduction, competence-building, and positive youth development. The study discussed here examined perceptions of CES personnel compared to other PROSPER team members regarding the CES: as a source of youth and family programming; its commitment to fostering school and community-based prevention programs; and as a leading force in improving the lives of youth and families.

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## Introduction

The study discussed here examined the perception of Cooperative Extension personnel, human service providers, and members involved in local PROSPER teams, regarding the role in the community that the Cooperative Extension Service played in providing prevention services to youth and families. PROSPER (**PRO**moting **S**chool-Community-University **P**artnerships to **E**nhance **R**esilience) is a research initiative designed to test a partnership model that builds capacity to deliver research-based family and youth interventions--interventions that are designed to bolster youth competencies, learning, and positive development (Spoth, Greenberg, Bierman & Redmond, 2004).

The PROSPER partnership model builds upon an extensive body of literature and existing conceptual frameworks for community-based partnerships addressing risk reduction, competence-building, and positive youth development. Namely, PROSPER creates a collaboration between two well-established educational delivery systems with a broad reach to American communities--public schools and the Cooperative Extension Service. These collaborations receive guidance and technical assistance based on science-guided practice from their state land-grant universities. (For more information on PROSPER, see Spoth, Greenberg, Bierman, & Redmond, 2004.)

## Extension's Involvement in Youth and Family Programs

The Cooperative Extension Service has a long history of providing educational programming for youth and families. The goal of Extension programming is to encourage self-reliance and improve the quality of life for youth and families. Cooperative Extension Service personnel implement research-based programs that address a broad range of issues and needs, including youth character development, youth science and technology skill development, youth and family resiliency skills, child care and parenting skills, as well as prevention programs addressing teen pregnancy, child abuse, community crime and violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and academic underachievement (Hobbs, 1994).

The Cooperative Extension Service supports base programs and national initiatives that provide direction for educational programming in each state. Base programs define the major program foci, are central to the mission of Cooperative Extension, and are common to most Cooperative Extension units. Two of the seven base programs support the Cooperative Extension Service's role in youth and family programming: 4-H and Youth Development and Family Development and Resource Management.

All states provide some programming in these base program areas. National initiatives are also created to meet specific emerging needs of communities and to respond to societal concerns. For example, *Extension Cares* is a national initiative developed to improve childcare and youth programs, as well as supporting prevention programming (CSREES, 2003).

Another national initiative, *Children, Youth and Families at Risk* (CYFAR), was developed to provide resources and strategies to foster and support prevention programming for at-risk children, youth, and families. Since 1991, CYFAR has supported programs in more than 600 communities in all states and territories.

As part of the CYFAR Initiative, an organizational change study was conducted in 42 states to assess the ability of the Cooperative Extension Service to work with at-risk children, youth, and families (Betts, Marczak, Peterson, Sewell, & Lipinski, 1998). The respondents, CES personnel, reported strong organizational support for expansion and strengthening programs for at-risk children, youth, and families. Moreover, in 34 states, one-half or more respondents reported that they are called upon at least monthly for their expertise related to children, youth, family, and community issues, suggesting that Cooperative Extension professionals are recognized for expertise related to youth and families.

## **Collaboration in Youth and Family Programs**

The Cooperative Extension Service is committed to fostering community-based partnerships and collaborations to solve local problems. A central value of the Cooperative Extension Service is to optimize resources and enhance program outcomes through partnerships with external organizations (White & Burnham, 1995). Warner, Hinrich, Schneyer, and Joyce (1998) suggest that the role of Cooperative Extension Service personnel is transitioning from educational programmer and facilitator to builder of community partnerships that engage in research focused on the community problem-solving process. The CYFAR Organizational Change Survey (Betts et al., 1998) found that collaboration with other community, state, and federal organizations was perceived to enhance the Cooperative Extension Service's experience and credibility in work with at-risk groups and that collaboration was worth the effort.

Lerner (1995) indicates that it is imperative for prevention research to include collaborations between researchers and community groups, agencies, and institutions. The Cooperative Extension Service can provide a valuable link between community groups and institutions (e.g., schools) to enable collaborative prevention efforts. The Cooperative Extension Service increasingly collaborates with schools and community agencies to develop, deliver, and evaluate prevention programs (Miltenberger, 2001; Molgard, 1997; Smith, Hill, Matranga, & Good, 1995; Smith, Hill & Bandera, 1997). Smith et al. (1995) conducted a qualitative study of school principals who had collaborated on youth at-risk programs with the Cooperative Extension Service. One of six major elements identified as making a difference in the collaboration was the local support provided by the Cooperative Extension Service.

## **Perception and Role of the Cooperative Extension Service in Providing Services to Youth and Families**

Warner, Christenson, Dillman, and Salant (1996) examined the public's perception of the Cooperative Extension Service and how it had changed from 1982 to 1995. Using a telephone survey, a random national sample of adults (N = 1,048) was asked their perception of the Cooperative Extension Service, use of their programs, and priorities for funding. The same questions were asked of a national random sample of adults in 1995 (N = 1,124); 45% indicated that they had heard of the Cooperative Extension Service, a 5% increase from 1982. Of the four program areas, 4-H had the greatest visibility (i.e., 69% of respondents had knowledge of 4-H programs); however, this was an 8% decline in the awareness level of the 4-H Youth Development program over the 13-year period. When asked if they or an immediate family member had ever used Cooperative Extension services, 26% indicated a positive response.

Across the U.S., the greatest rate of use was found in the Midwest and Southern regions, among

those living on farms, among Caucasians, by middle-aged persons, and by those with higher educational and income levels. Even though the Cooperative Extension Service has made a concerted programming effort to reach under-served audiences (e.g., urban residents, youth and young families, and persons with lower levels of income and education), those groups remain the least likely to be aware of the Cooperative Extension Service (Warner et al., 1996).

Johns, Moncloa, and Gong (2000) examined the Cooperative Extension Service's role in strengthening community-based programs focused on pregnant and parenting teens. They identified 10 best practices for teen pregnancy prevention. In particular, they noted that the Cooperative Extension Service could provide extensive knowledge and support in three of the 10 best practices: youth development, family involvement, and cultural relevance. The authors identified those three issues because of the Cooperative Extension Service's historic experience and expertise in those areas.

Through the 4-H Youth Development program, the Cooperative Extension Service has played a key role for over 100 years with programs focused on academic enrichment, life skill development, community service, and leadership development. Supporting and developing family involvement programs is another role identified for the Cooperative Extension Service. In the majority of states, the extensive experience and knowledge of Cooperative Extension personnel was identified as a major asset in working with multicultural populations through the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program and the 4-H Youth Development program.

In sum, the Cooperative Extension Service is the only community-based organization with a direct connection to the research expertise of the land-grant university and has a history of effective and extensive collaborative networking among community agencies and institutions who serve youth and families (Coward, VanHorn, & Jackson, 1986). From the literature reviewed previously, there is strong descriptive and anecdotal evidence that the Cooperative Extension Service is a community leader in providing services to children, youth, and families.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study discussed here was to examine the perception of the Cooperative Extension Service as an organization addressing issues facing children, youth, and families. Data were drawn from the PROSPER project. Cooperative Extension Service agents and directors, as well as members of community PROSPER teams, were interviewed to assess: the Cooperative Extension Service's reputation for providing services to youth and families, the perceived level of commitment that the Cooperative Extension Service has for fostering school and community-based prevention programs, and perceptions of the Cooperative Extension Service as a leading force in improving the lives of youth and families. Specifically, the research questions were:

1. Is there a difference between Cooperative Extension Service agents' and directors' perceptions of the Cooperative Extension Service in terms of:
  - a. reputation in providing services to youth and families;
  - b. commitment to fostering school and community-based prevention programs; and
  - c. as a leading force in improving the lives of youth and families?
2. Is there a difference between Cooperative Extension Service personnel and community PROSPER team member perceptions of the Cooperative Extension Service in terms of:
  - a. reputation in providing services to youth and families;
  - b. commitment to fostering school and community-based prevention programs; and
  - c. as a leading force in improving the lives of youth and families?

## **Methods**

In the spring of 2002, paid survey researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with Cooperative Extension Service agents (N=22) on PROSPER teams, county Cooperative Extension Service directors from PROSPER communities (N=19), and other PROSPER team members (N =238) in 28 communities (i.e., 14 in Pennsylvania and 14 in Iowa). Those interviews included both comparison (N=7) and intervention communities (N=7) in each state and were completed at the beginning of the PROSPER project. No PROSPER activities had occurred in the intervention communities prior to the interviews. PROSPER team members were identified and interviewed in the comparison communities although they never formed or met as a team following the interviews.

Communities involved in the PROSPER study included rural areas and small towns with school districts varying between 1,236 and 5,192 students; the average school district size was slightly less than 3,000 students. PROSPER team members included parents, Safe and Drug Free School coordinators, community mental health and substance abuse agency representatives, principals, and other school personnel (e.g., teachers and guidance counselors). Participants were asked

questions about their perception of the Cooperative Extension Service regarding:

1. *Reputation* in the community;
2. *Commitment* to fostering school and community-based prevention programs; and
3. *Leading force* in improving the lives of youth and families.

## Measures

### Reputation

This single-item variable was measured with responses to the statement, "The Cooperative Extension Service has a good reputation in this community for providing services to youth and families." Participants were asked to respond using a Likert scale ranging from "Strongly agree" (1) to "Strongly disagree" (4).

### Commitment

Participant responses to this single-item variable were measured with the statement, "The Cooperative Extension Service is committed to fostering school- and community-based prevention programs." The same four-point Likert scale was used as with the reputation variable.

### Leading force

This single-item variable measured the level of agreement with the statement, "The Cooperative Extension Service is seen as a leading force in the community in improving the lives of youth and families." The Likert response scale ranged from "Strongly agree" (1) to "Strongly disagree" (4).

## Results

The analyses involved a two-step process. First, descriptive statistics were conducted on all the variables. Second, the Fisher's Exact Test was used to investigate significant differences for both the first and second research questions.

### CES Agents' and Directors' Perceptions

In terms of the reputation of the Cooperative Extension Service in providing community youth and family programs, no significant difference was found between the perceptions of agents and directors (Fisher's Exact Test = 0.1.69; N = 39; p = 0.58) (Table 1). Given the small cell sizes for the "Strongly disagree" and "Disagree" categories, these two categories were collapsed into one category. A subsequent Fisher's Exact Test found no significant difference between perceptions of Cooperative Extension Service agents and directors (Fisher's Exact Test = .52; N = 39; p = 0.54).

**Table 1.**  
Perceptions of CES Agents and Directors Regarding Reputation

Personnel Type	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Extension Director	0	0	0	0	8	44.4	10	55.6	18	100
Extension Agent	0	0	2	9.5	7	33.3	12	57.1	21	99.9*
Total	0		2		15		22		39**	
Fisher's Exact Test = 1.69, N = 39, p = 0.58 *Does not equal 100% due to rounding. ** 1 Extension agent and 1 Extension director data are missing										

Service's commitment to fostering school and community-based prevention programs were similar. No significant difference was found between perceptions of commitment (Fisher's Exact Test = 0.22, N = 41; p= 0.99). Because the counts were so low for the "Strongly disagree" and "Disagree" categories, these two categories were collapsed into one category to determine whether there was a difference for those that "Disagreed/strongly disagreed" and those that "Agreed/strongly agreed." However, no significant difference was found (Fisher's Exact Test = 0.22, N = 41; p = 0.99).

In examining the perception of the Cooperative Extension Service as a leading force in improving the lives of youth and families, no significant difference was found between agents' and directors' perceptions (Fisher's Exact Test = 3.19; N = 40; p = 0.32). Two categories, the "Strongly disagree" and the "Disagree" categories, were combined into one category. The Fisher Exact Test with the combined category yielded no significant differences between Cooperative Extension Service agents' and directors' perceptions (Fisher's Exact Test = 1.58; N =40; p = 0.54).

### **CES Personnel's and Other PROSPER Team Members' Perceptions**

Using Fisher's Exact Test, no significant difference was found between perceptions of CES personnel (i.e., agents and directors; N=41) and other PROSPER team members (N=238) regarding the Cooperative Extension Service's reputation for providing services to community youth and families (Fisher's Exact Test = 1.78; N = 233; p = 0.63). The categories of "Strongly disagree" and "Disagree" were combined, and another Fishers' Exact Test was completed. However, no significant difference was found (Fisher's Exact Test=1.54; N=233; p=. 51). In terms of perceptions about the Cooperative Extension Service's commitment to fostering school and community-based prevention programs, an overwhelming majority (91%) of PROSPER team members "Agreed/strongly agreed" that the Cooperative Extension Service was committed to that goal.

Similarly, the majority of Cooperative Extension Service personnel (89%) reported that they believed the Cooperative Extension Service has a commitment to fostering prevention programming. Given this similarity, no differences were found between Cooperative Extension Service personnel compared to the other PROSPER team members in their perception of the commitment of the Cooperative Extension Service to foster prevention programs (Fisher's Exact Test = 2.35; N = 244; p = 0.48) (Table 2).

**Table 2.**  
Perceptions of CES Commitment among CES Personnel and Other PROSPER Members

Team Member Role	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Extension Director & Agent	0	0	4	9.8	19	46.3	18	43.9	41	100
Other PROSPER Team Members	5	2.5	13	6.4	77	37.9	108	53.2	203	100
Total	5		17		96		126		244	
<i>Fisher's Exact Test = 2.35, N = 244, p = 0.48</i>										

The categories of "Strongly disagree" and "Disagree" were collapsed due to a low count, and another Fisher's Exact Test was conducted. No significant difference was found (Fisher's Exact Test = 1.36; N = 244; p = 0.51).

Perceptual differences between Cooperative Extension Service personnel and other PROSPER team members regarding Cooperative Extension Service as a leading force in improving the lives of youth and families were also examined with the Fisher's Exact Test. A significant difference was found between perceptions of Cooperative Extension Service personnel and other PROSPER team members (Fisher's Exact Test = 7.97; N = 245; p < .05) (Table 3). Specifically, Cooperative Extension Service personnel (89%) were significantly more likely to perceive the Cooperative Extension Service as a leading force in the community in improving the lives of youth and families

compared to other PROSPER team members (66%).

**Table 3.**  
Perceptions of CES as a Leading Force in Improving Lives between CES Personnel and Other PROSPER Members

Team Member Role	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Extension Director & Agent	1	2.5	4	10.0	23	57.5	12	30.0	40*	100
Other PROSPER Team Members	8	3.9	59	28.8	101	49.3	37	18.0	205	100
Total	9		63		124		49		245	

*Fisher's Exact Test = 7.97, N = 245, p = 0.04*  
\*1 Extension director or Extension agent data are missing

## Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine perceptions of the Cooperative Extension Service as a community organization that addresses issues concerning youth and families. The perceptual similarity of both agents and directors points to a strong, shared mission and vision among all Cooperative Extension Service personnel. Specifically, both agents and directors who participated in the study, from both the comparison and intervention communities, agreed with the Cooperative Extension Service mission of fostering community-based collaborative efforts to enhance the quality of life for all community residents with special regard for children, youth, and families.

Both Cooperative Extension Service personnel and other PROSPER team members had similar positive perceptions concerning the reputation of the Cooperative Extension Service in providing services to youth and families. Further, the majority of respondents (both community team members and Cooperative Extension Service personnel) reported that the Cooperative Extension Service was committed to providing prevention programs. Thus, non-Cooperative Extension Service community professionals (other PROSPER team members) reported a strong reputation and commitment of the Cooperative Extension Service. Those findings concur with previous research (Johns et al., 2000) indicating the historic experience and expertise of the Cooperative Extension Service in providing programs to both youth and families.

A significant difference was found between Cooperative Extension Service personnel and other PROSPER team members regarding Cooperative Extension Service as a leading force in improving the quality of life for youth and families. PROSPER team members were less likely to perceive the Cooperative Extension Service as a leading force in improving the quality of life for youth and families. However, it is important to note that approximately two-thirds of the PROSPER team members did perceive the Cooperative Extension Service as a leading community force.

## Implications

The Cooperative Extension Service does have a positive, well-established reputation among most youth and family-serving agency personnel. The Cooperative Extension Service needs to capitalize on this reputation to strengthen relationships and build collaborations with other youth and family-serving organizations and further solidify its role as an essential community partner.

Nevertheless, approximately one-third of PROSPER team members did not view the Cooperative Extension Service as a *leading force* in providing youth and family programs. An implication of this finding is that the Cooperative Extension Service needs to embark on an aggressive social marketing campaign targeted at increasing agency personnel's and the general public's awareness and support for Cooperative Extension Service programs. Moreover, the increased visibility might increase local citizens' engagement in Cooperative Extension Service programs.

Successes and challenges faced by the Cooperative Extension Service as it implements partnership models, such as PROSPER, where Cooperative Extension is a strategic partner, need to be shared with other Extension personnel. Replicating partnership models may help to address shrinking Extension programming budgets. Moreover, with limited program resources, the Cooperative Extension Service must collaborate with other youth and family-serving agencies to share resources and address the complex issues facing youth and families. Many funding agencies are requiring community partnerships be formed and are unwilling to grant funding to a single organizational entity. Programs delivered through a PROSPER-like partnership model may become the operational standard for Cooperative Extension in the future.

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