

12-1-2004

Is Extension Relevant for the 21st Century?

Nancy H. Bull

University of Connecticut, nancy.bull@uconn.edu

Lawrence S. Cote

West Virginia University, larry.cote@mail.wvu.edu

Paul D. Warner

University of Kentucky, pwarner@uky.edu

M Ray McKinnie

North Carolina A&T State University, mckinnie@ncat.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

Bull, N. H., Cote, L. S., Warner, P. D., & McKinnie, M. (2004). Is Extension Relevant for the 21st Century?. *The Journal of Extension*, 42(6), Article 3. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol42/iss6/3>

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.



December 2004 // Volume 42 // Number 6 // Commentary // 6COM2



PREVIOUS
ARTICLE



ISSUE
CONTENTS



NEXT
ARTICLE



POST
A COMMENT

0

Is Extension Relevant for the 21st Century?

Abstract

As a 90-year-old artifact of the days when an agrarian economy dominated society, is it possible for Extension to still be relevant? As the primary outreach and public service function of land-grant universities, the relevance of Extension is tied to the perception and reality of the relevance of these host institutions. Did the recent ECOP report *A Vision for the 21st Century* and other ECOP statements address whether Extension remains relevant to the 21st century context? Extension educators are assisting communities of place and of interest and involving more university and agency colleagues in responding to changing citizen education needs.

Nancy H. Bull

Associate Dean, Outreach and Public Service
Associate Director, Cooperative Extension System
University of Connecticut
Storrs, Connecticut
Nancy.Bull@uconn.edu

Lawrence S. Cote

Associate Provost for Extension and Public Service
Director, Cooperative Extension Service
West Virginia University
Morgantown, West Virginia
Larry.Cote@mail.wvu.edu

Paul D. Warner

Assistant Director, Program and Staff Development
University of Kentucky
Lexington, Kentucky
pwarner@uky.edu

M. Ray McKinnie

Associate Dean, Cooperative Extension
North Carolina A&T State University
Greensboro, North Carolina
mckinnie@ncat.edu

As a 90-year-old artifact of the days when an agrarian economy dominated society, is it possible for Cooperative Extension to still be relevant? As the primary outreach and public service function of most land-grant universities, the relevance of Extension is closely tied to the perception of relevance of the host public, land-grant institutions.

Cooperative Extension: A Vision for the 21st Century

In 2002, the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) published the report, *The Extension System: A Vision for the 21st Century*. "[It] proposes a vision of the Extension System that addresses contemporary issues relevant to constituents residing within and beyond its traditional rural and agrarian heritage" (p.1). The report calls upon Extension leadership to draw upon the universities' many disciplines to respond to changing societal needs.

The report was developed in response to (and assessed the effectiveness of Extension against) the seven-part test of university engagement proposed in the Kellogg Commission monograph *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution (1999)*. The seven characteristics of engaged

institutions proposed there were:

- Responsiveness
- Respect for partners
- Academic neutrality
- Accessibility
- Integration
- Coordination
- Resource partnerships.

Perhaps the eighth component should be relevance: being appropriate to the community needs and context of the day.

The concept of engagement is central to the Kellogg Commission's series of recommendations (published in six reports between 1997 and 2001) as to how land-grant universities can remain relevant. The engagement concept "goes well beyond extension, conventional outreach, and even most conceptions of public service" (Kellogg, 1999).

Mission Creep or Context Change?

Some observers charge that Extension has experienced mission creep and should return to a focus on agriculture (Peters, 2004). Others argue that Extension is a "captive" of agriculture interests and should serve a broader national purpose (McDowell, 2001).

In 1903, following a request for assistance by a group of local farmers, federal agriculture specialist Seaman Knapp and farmer/collaborator Walter Porter initiated test plots on the Porter Farm in Kaufman County, Texas. Knapp and Porter focused on solving economic/productivity problems in the context of agricultural production and the community of the day. Dr. Knapp's philosophy, "what he does himself, he cannot doubt" (Texas A&M, 2003), became the mantra for the national Cooperative Extension System.

As Extension addressed a broader array of community-based needs during the 20th century and drew upon more university disciplines and developed programs within urban settings, the question of mission creep arose. Boyle (1996) and others have proposed that meeting the Extension responsibility to serve the lifelong learning needs of people involves a commitment of the total university. Extending the research of the public, land-grant university to solve problems through stakeholder collaboration continues today. A safe, secure, and productive food system remains critical. Yet the context and need for Extension education have proliferated.

American society is now more diverse, urban populations have increased, yet the demand for affordable food continues. Just as Knapp and Porter were learning partners, Extension personnel today work as partners with citizens, communities, and university colleagues. Today land use, obesity prevention, responsible use of pesticides, urban revitalization, non-agriculture commerce, and specific attention to the needs of underserved audiences are among the expanded Extension portfolio, in addition to programs serving the original stakeholders. Extension is still about improving the quality of life for citizens.

- Consistent with Knapp's mantra, today the Cooperative Extension System of the 21st century:
- Ensures continued world leadership in agriculture and the stewardship of the nation's natural resources,
- Strives to create confident, public-service oriented citizens through 4-H youth development and adult leadership programs, and
- Strengthens families and the viability of communities (ECOP, 2003).

More Relevant Today Than Ever

Extension has directed its resources to focus on relevant issues within the evolving context of local, state, multi-state, and national learning priorities. Extension must continue to communicate that evolving and multiple learning contexts (the emergence of e-Extension, for example), coupled with changing and expanding learning needs of citizens, always has been a characteristic of relevant, research-based, and high-quality Extension education. Expansion and redirection of resources is appropriate today to remain vital.

The strategic partnership of land-grant universities with federal, state, and local governments enables delivery of critically needed educational programs at the grass roots level. Faculty and staff serving in over 3,000 counties provide the front door to the nation's public universities, enabling higher education resources to be used to solve real problems. While viewed historically as a rural program, 21st century Extension now touches almost every aspect of people's lives regardless of where they live (ECOP, 2003).

As in 1903, citizens within their local community context still today best resolve problems in most aspects of everyday living. To continue to move forward, the Cooperative Extension System must learn to move more quickly, to take advantage of new opportunities, and to build financial partners

(Harris, 2004).

Extension in the 21st Century

Almost 20 years ago Dillman (1985) described Extension as being at the cross roads of differing societal contexts. The transformation of society moved from a focus on community control within a sense of place, to a mass society. As we move further into the information age--which tends to focus on communities of interest--Extension increasingly is responding to the learning needs of both communities of interest and of place.

To continue to be relevant in this evolving context, everyone must play a role. Keith Smith, 2004 ECOP chair, challenged Extension directors and administrators to look inwardly and assume responsibility for Extension's future.

There are specific things that can be done. As you communicate with key constituents and clients, weave the seven-part test of engagement into messages. Offer examples of how Extension programs demonstrate these characteristics of the engaged university. Provide clearer descriptions of problems addressed and why, followed by demonstrated impact on problem resolution over time. Strive to remember and apply the eighth test: keep Extension relevant to the changing learning needs of both communities of place and of interest.

Continue to build upon the basic agricultural Extension model, yet build collaborative relationships with federal, state, and local agencies and university partners who possess the expertise and resources needed to solve today's critical problems. Require new partners to participate in the full cost, not the marginal cost, of adding major components to the national Cooperative Extension System portfolio (Hefferan, 2004).

Conclusion

Extension is a living, evolving, market-driven organization that responds to society's changing needs. Lifelong learning is expanding by utilizing existing and new, university-based, knowledge to solve complex problems cooperatively with citizens and their communities. As a unique achievement in American education, the Cooperative Extension System needs to assist the entire university to better engage citizens and communities to create an improved quality of life (ECOP, 2003)--and in return, to create a more complete academic learning experience for core university faculty and their students (Kriesky & Cote, 2003). Whether Extension will remain relevant, in significant part, lies within each of us privileged to be Extension professionals.

References

- Boyle, P. G. (1996). *Building political support for Extension in the 21st century*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Dillman, D.A. (1985). *Cooperative Extension at the beginning of the 21st century*. Paper presented at the national Community Resource Development Program Leader Conference, Logan, Utah.
- Extension Committee on Organization and Policy. (2002). *The Extension system: A vision for the 21st century*. Washington, D.C., National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges.
- Extension Committee on Organization and Policy. (2003). *The Cooperative Extension System: More relevant today than ever*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Harris, L. & Associates (2004). *4-H science and technology strategic planning: Top level findings from environmental scan and asset audit*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Hefferan, C. (2004). Keynote address: *Extension programming across the natural, socioeconomic, and political landscapes*. Wheeling, WV: 4th Natural Resource Extension Professionals Conference--Extension outside the box: Natural resources programming across landscapes.
- Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities. (1997). *Returning to our roots: The engaged institution* (Report 3). Washington, DC: National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges.
- Kriesky, J., & Cote, L. S. (Fall 2002/Winter 2003). Extension/academic service-learning: Benefits and lessons learned. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 8 (1), 45-58.
- McDowell, G. (2001). *Land-grant universities and extension into the 21st century*. Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press.
- Pearsall, J. (Ed.). (2002). *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (10th ed., revised). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Peters, S. (n.d.). *Mission drift or renewal? Recovering a historical grounding for assessing Cooperative Extension's civic work*. Retrieved June 25, 2004, from: <http://www.publicwork.org/pdf/workingpapers/>

 **Discussion**