Leading Organizational Change: A Comparison of County and Campus Views of Extension Engagement

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Abstract
Feeling pressure from stakeholders, Cornell Cooperative Extension has responded using the Kellogg Commission report on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities as a blueprint for organizational change. Results of interviews revealed both similarities and differences in county and state staff views of engagement. The most significant difference is that county staff view their jobs as the critical link between community needs and university resources, while campus staff view them as implementers of programs. This finding suggests a need to engage all staff in a mutual dialogue of roles and expectation if change based on Extension engagement is to be successful.

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A variety of social forces have put extreme pressure on all educational institutions to become more dynamic, especially the Cooperative Extension System (see King, 1999) . These pressures include rapid development in the availability of information, expectations of faster response times to problems, and greater demand for stakeholder involvement in decision-making processes (King & Boehlje, 2000) . For example, Spanier (2000) argues that, "our institutions need to find new ways of thinking about what we do if we wish to continue to be successful.

The work of the Kellogg Commission offers a model that transforms our historic mission of teaching, research, and service into a forward-looking agenda of learning, discovery, and engagement in keeping with the changes that characterize our society." In response to this challenge, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities has argued that the Cooperative Extension System should be front and center in the effort to make universities more dynamic or "engaged" with communities (Kellogg Commission on The Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, 1999) .

A number of land-grant universities have taken up the Kellogg Commission challenge to become more engaged through their Cooperative Extension Service, including Cornell Cooperative Extension. Their "Committed to Excellence" process is designed to make the organization more dynamic, bringing the resources of Cornell and the needs of New York state citizens in closer contact with each other. As part of the process, the Director of Cornell Cooperative Extension commissioned a study of the statewide program committees to determine:

a. The strengths and weaknesses of this structure,

b. How program teams representing all of the relevant stakeholders can facilitate the engagement process, and

c. Other lessons to be learned in implementing the "Committed to Excellence" process.

This study, conducted by the S.C. Johnson Graduate School of Management at Cornell University, included detailed interviews exploring individual staff views of the Extension engagement process. Additional interviews were conducted beyond this original study to obtain input from equal numbers of county and state-level staff.

This article, based on the data from our original study and the follow-up, examines perceptions of Extension engagement from multiple points of view, particularly comparing the perceptions of campus (e.g., department faculty, staff, and administrators) county (e.g., county program staff and Executive Directors) staff.

Research Questions

1. What is Extension engagement?

- How is Extension engagement defined by the various constituencies?
- What are the key components of the definition?
- Is there a unified definition of Extension engagement across the Cornell Cooperative Extension system?

2. What are the barriers and facilitators of Extension engagement?

- Do people perceive it as important?
- Are internal or external barriers more important?
- How important is leadership to the process? What type of leadership?

3. How can Extension engagement be measured across contexts?

- What kind of measures would work best?
- What are the key indicators of success, failure?

Research Design

Sample

Our research sampled Cornell Cooperative Extension faculty, staff, and administrators, including 28 campus-based employees and 39 county staff representing 33 of 57counties and New York City. The campus-based employees included 17 faculty, 8 Extension Associates, and 3 Extension administrators. County staff included 29 Executive Directors and 10 Extension educators. Individuals in the study represented the geographic variance of New York State, as well as both the Ithaca and Geneva campus locations. In an attempt to get a representative sample of people employed by CCE, our sample represented a wide variety of content expertise and years of experience with Extension.

Methods

This study included semi-structured individual interviews and focus group interviews. All campus-based staff were interviewed in person (see Peterson, Thomas-Hunt, Dailey, Franz, & Rodgers, 2000 for more details of questions asked). County staff geographically near the campus were interviewed in person. However, some county staff were interviewed via e-mail survey for convenience. We found no differences in comparing county staff who were interviewed via in person interviews or e-mail.

Research Findings

Research Question 1: What Is Extension Engagement?

There was broad agreement among both campus and county Extension staff that the overall intent of engagement is to mesh university resources and research with community or client needs. The most common definition included "a connection between two parties." This is where the agreement ended, however. For campus interviewees, Extension engagement was most often defined by the faculty-client relationship, with the client defined as a taxpayer, stakeholder, or the community. Illustrating this community-university relationship idea, one campus-based Extension administrator interviewed said, "Extension engagement is defined in two dimensions: the campus-county connect and the county-community connect."

County Extension staff, on the other hand, most often defined Extension engagement as a university-community relationship that puts them at the center of the connection between campus-based faculty and the client in the community. For example, one county staff person

stated, "I believe an engaged university, including the partnership with Cornell Cooperative Extension, is a university that is responsive to the issues and needs of citizens in the state or county/area they serve. Faculty and county and other university staff need to listen to what and how people want educational resources and issues addressed."

County staff, in particular, were more concerned with establishing a dialogue in which counties communicate needs and state staff communicate resources in order to match the two. A common complaint included state staff engaged in one-way communication only. For example, a county staff person said, "What I hear is that faculty seem to think of us as extensions of their departments--and we are told to do what they want. What we think is that faculty are not responsive and that it is easier to get information and help from [another state or agency]. So where is the [two-way] dialogue?"

In sum, state and county Extension staff share a similar overall view of what Extension engagement intends to achieve, but differ in their understanding of how to enact it. Campus-based views are more often one-dimensional (serving the public domain), focusing on pleasing the community and viewing county staff as instruments for delivering what the campus has to offer. County views, on the other hand, are more two-dimensional (a university-community partnership), with a focus on county staff playing a key intermediary role of both communicating community needs to state staff as well as delivering programs.

Research Question 2: What Are the Barriers and Facilitators of Extension Engagement?

Although campus and county staff did not completely agree on how to enact Extension engagement, participants in our study did reach a near consensus when asked whether engagement is critical to the future of Extension. Study participants frequently used words such as "vital," "important," "essential," and "critical" in describing this concept. For example, one campus faculty said, "If we want a successful, well respected Cornell Cooperative Extension we need engagement."

Both county and state staff shared similar perspectives, suggesting that internal barriers are more significant than external barriers to Extension engagement. County staff most often mentioned a lack of material and human resources such as internal staff capabilities, relationships between campus and county units, lack of time, and financial resources as important limiters of Extension engagement. Some county staff were, for example, not interested in conversations taking place in the organization around engagement. They said they had more immediate priorities than the engagement issue.

Campus faculty, staff, and administrators specifically mentioned barriers to Extension engagement, including:

a. A reward system that focuses on basic research and publication rather than applied research and meeting community needs,

b. A mismatch between current staff capabilities and community needs, and

c. Rules, red tape, and bureaucracy (i.e., lack of administrative flexibility) as the major internal factors hindering Extension engagement.

Although not perceived to be as important, consensus existed between county and state staff about the external barriers to engagement. Those barriers most often discussed included strong stakeholder demands and politics. These thoughts are exemplified by one faculty member who said, "I think what we have in New York is such a political system that the state legislature will make sure that change will never take place." One county staff person believes "that partnership, that collegiality, those relationships aren't there and they should be if you are defined as an engaged organization."

One difference, however, is that county staff focused on credibility as an important external factor. Campus interviewees were more comfortable with Cornell's credibility, but also saw the university's larger vision as an external factor in the engagement process.

Study participants did not verbalize one specific type of leadership style that facilitates or impedes Extension engagement. However, campus representatives envisioned common characteristics of leaders most effective in bringing about the organizational change necessary for Extension engagement. They suggest that the ideal engagement leader would be someone who inspires respect, is a visionary, and provides for accountability.

From the county perspective, a leader who promotes Extension engagement is a visionary, an excellent communicator, an architect of climate, and is credible. There was a call for top administrative and issue leadership for engagement from both groups. County staff also saw local boards, staff, and others throughout the organization as important leaders for engagement in a way that state staff did not.

Aside from Extension administrators, campus interviewees felt that department chairs, county Executive Directors, and stakeholders are perceived as leaders for engagement. These thoughts on leadership for Extension engagement are reflected by a county Executive Director who stated,

"Top folks have to have strong leadership skills and see the vision, but I guess that every single person in the organization plays a leadership role as well." An Extension Associate on campus also relates that leadership "takes a certain level of respect from people in the group, credibility and I'd even add charisma to be able to keep people engaged."

Research Question 3: How Should Extension Engagement Be Measured?

There were clear differences between campus and state-level views in response to this question. Campus interviewees felt engagement should include a self-evaluation gauging response to community needs as well as an evaluation made by other staff people off campus. The campus staff specifically argued that engagement should be measured by the utilization of local knowledge in research and programming, doing applied research based on county needs, and by evaluating people and programs in relation to internal engagement goals. This common campus-based feeling about measuring Extension engagement is voiced by a faculty member who said, "[Administration should] come up with clear-cut goals of what to accomplish and start evaluating people and programs related to those goals."

County staff, however, believe that the process should include external stakeholders as well as faculty and staff, who jointly carry out research and programs. An audit by an external party was suggested as one way to accomplish this. County staff were able to generate a long list of methods and outcomes to measure Extension engagement. They preferred both qualitative and quantitative measures of engagement. One county Executive Director argued, "In my opinion, numbers are only the tip of the iceberg and do not necessarily measure impact. I think a critical component of how one measures engagement needs to address and relate to the audience with whom the information is being shared. We may find it easier to think about one size fitting all, but it won't."

In sum, real differences existed between state and county staff about who should be included in assessing engagement (whether community members should conduct part of the evaluation) and what types of indicators should be used to measure engagement (e.g., quantitative versus qualitative).

Conclusions and Implications

The study reported here examined the perceptions of Extension engagement by campus and county staff in the Cornell Cooperative Extension System. Significant areas of overlap existed between campus and county views for each of the three research questions we asked. Significant differences were also found, however, and these differences have important implications for how Cooperative Extension System administrators should lead the change process of Extension engagement. We discuss each of these differences and their implications in turn.

The first major difference we found was as basic as defining Extension engagement and how to implement it. Important differences were found, with state staff focusing on direct interaction with the community and viewing county staff as an implementation team. This is in strong contrast to the more two-way view of county staff, who see their own role as the pivotal linking point connecting state resources and community needs.

We believe this has a number of important implications for organizational changed based on Extension engagement. First and foremost, this finding indicates that efforts to implement engagement programs should begin with a discussion of the role of county staff in the process. Engaging county staff in dialogue to come to a common understanding of roles is the first step toward state staff engaging the community. Once this process occurs, that common understanding should be communicated consistently throughout the organization (e.g., new staff selection, new staff orientation, professional development, performance management).

The other significant difference we found between county and state staff is in how Extension engagement should be measured and who should be involved in the process. State staff are more inclined to want to look at a few key quantitative measures (versus qualitative data) and focus on Extension goals (versus the goals of external stakeholders).

Again, these differences have important implications for how Extension engagement should be implemented. Beyond the obvious need to come to agreement on how to measure engagement success, we believe this means that engagement successes must be rewarded appropriately in ways that will appeal to both county and state staff. This should include not only a sharing of goals accomplished, but specific stories and qualitative descriptions of engagement successes within the organization and between staff and external stakeholders.

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