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ABSTRACT

The extension and research systems of land-grant institutions are in trouble. Six factors demonstrate the scope of the problem: significant cuts for agriculture in the Clinton administration budget; lawmakers opposed to extension research; federal budget deficit; state budget constraints; decreased power of agriculture in Congress; and agriculture's negative image. Other developments affecting the extension system are as follows telecommunications becoming a regular part of inservice training and educational program delivery; states sharing agricultural experiment station facilities and personnel; and CD-ROM systems allowing instant access to and local printout of extension educational resources. Imperatives for extension include the following: developing a strategic plan; strengthening the capability of extension faculty; resolving to improve service to agriculture and address the high-tech commercial agriculture issue; establishing a process to create centers/networks of excellence that can be accessed nationwide; improving the knowledge base and cooperation among directors/administrators; developing models for gaining access to the total resources of the university for outreach; and continuing system emphasis on diversity. Critical issues for cooperative extension's adult educators are redirection of land-grant institutions to be most responsive to the changing needs of agriculture and society; reconstitution of a broad base of public support; and examination of the validity of the cooperative extension system model. (Contains 14 references.) (YLB)

WINDS OF CHANGE: TOWARD A REALISTIC VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

A Roundtable Presentation for
the National Conference of the
American Association for Adult & Continuing Education

by

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Winds of Change:
Toward a Realistic Vision for
The Future of Cooperative Extension

Cooperative Extension has been affected by many winds of change for the past several years. For more than a decade the task of keeping the organization on course has been daunting as the "winds" have shifted with varying degrees of intensity from different directions. Recent "gusts" have carried with them impending organizational changes that could have profound effect on the future of the organization.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to examine the implications for extension professionals, as adult educators, of the changes that are taking place (or have already taken place) within Cooperative Extension and to assess some of the issues confronting the organization as we approach the end of the 1990s.

Discussion

According to a former staff member of the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, both the extension and research systems of land-grant institutions are in trouble. In an address prepared for a University of Nebraska-Lincoln rural policy symposium conducted in March 1993, Kathleen Merrigan listed six factors providing dimension to the scope of the problem:

- significant cuts for agriculture in the Clinton Administration budget;
- the continued presence on Capitol Hill of anti-extension-research lawmakers;
- the federal budget deficit;
- state budget constraints;
- decreased power of agriculture in Congress;
- agriculture's negative image.

She says, "The major problem for the Extension Service right now is that the organization has no vision. If you ask what Extension does, the response is that Extension is all things to all people. That is not a satisfactory answer in today's budget climate." (Merrigan, 1993)

How accurate is Merrigan's assessment and how did extension get to this critical juncture? Part of the answer becomes evident simply by a backward glance over time.

When Smith-Lever was enacted in 1914 formally establishing Cooperative Extension, an estimated 35 percent of the U.S. population was actively engaged in production agriculture. An estimated 50 percent of the nation's population lived in what was defined as "rural" areas. Society's challenge at that point as described by Klonglan (1992) was to produce an adequate supply of reasonably priced food for the U.S. population and to generate enough income for farmers and agribusinesses to have a reasonable standard of living. Thus extension programs were built solidly around production agriculture, home economics and youth work (4-H). County agents were valuable community resources providing the latest research information generated from experiment stations and colleges of agriculture and home economics at the land-grant institutions of the various states.

This model served extension well for the first 60 years or so of its existence. As an organization, extension was singularly successful in effecting change in rural America, not only in the realm of production agriculture, but also in improving the quality of rural life. Production technologies developed by land-grant researchers and disseminated through extension not only resolved the production problem, but eventually were pivotal factors in agriculture reaching the overproduction stage (Klonglan, 1992). (Some observers contend we simply traded production problems for distribution problems.) Farmers were able to produce food and fiber very efficiently, but for many, the economic viability of the enterprise was absent. As a result, several "winds of change" gathered force; prominent among them was farm/rural population decline coupled with urban population increases.

There has been a continuing decline in the number of U.S. farms since the middle 1930s. Just since 1980, according to the Nebraska Agricultural Statistical Service, there has been a drop from 2.52 million farms to only 2.1 million farms at the end of 1992. At the same time, land in farms dropped from more than a billion acres nationally to just over 980 million acres (NASS, 1992). On the other hand, agricultural productivity has continued to rise over time despite occasional aberrations such as the floods that devastated the Midwest in 1993.

As the urbanization trend gained momentum, some of the problems noted by Merrigan surfaced. The population shift away from rural areas has eroded the political base upon which extension has traditionally relied for support. There have been increasing urban pluralities in lawmaking bodies at both the federal and state level. Thus agriculture has lost much of the political "clout" that has sustained it throughout much of its history. The effects of this trend were clearly evident

during the administrations of both Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. Each sent budgets to Congress that would have markedly reduced or even eliminated extension. In both instances, extension was hard-pressed to rally supporters to see the organization through the crises.

While recent federal budgets for extension have remained relatively stable - and even had small increases in some program areas - state budgets have been just the opposite. Wholesale staff reductions, operating budget cuts and reorganizations have become commonplace in many states.

Predictably, the "winds of change" converged creating some program challenges for extension as well. Some of the "gusts" and extension's responses to them are reported in a paper I presented at the 1991 AAACE national conference in Montreal (Vitzthum, 1991). Those winds came from a variety of directions: environmental concerns emerged in the 1960s, the energy crises in the '70s, the farm financial crises in the '80s along with exponential advances in the technology arena. Paradoxically, many of the new problems that emerged came into being because of extension recommendations. For example, nitrogen fertilizer use that helped achieve maximum yields eventually led to nitrate-nitrogen problems in ground water. Herbicides and pesticides that paved the way for monocultural crop production became the focal points of a variety of problems: food safety concerns, human and animal health concerns, farm worker safety concerns, and so on.

None of this happened overnight; extension leaders sensed the changing societal parameters several years ago and attempted to respond accordingly. As its traditional rural audience base dwindled, extension began redirecting its programs putting increasing emphasis on urban areas. This decision was decidedly controversial and met with the disapprobation of both the General Accounting Office (1981) and the Office of Technology Assessment (1986) as well as farm organizations and commodity groups. And as already noted, the White House translated disapproval into budget recommendations.

At issue was the question of whether extension should change at all and if so, how. Conservative traditionalists contended that extension was established to be agricultural and it should stay that way. Extension leaders saw a need to revamp the organization's programs to keep pace with the pervasive changes taking place not only in agriculture, but society as a whole.

It was into a whirlwind of controversy that "issues-based programming" was launched in 1986. Fielding the concept was hardly an example of managerial decisiveness. As one national program leader describes it, extension "...selected eight (then nine, then five, then six, then seven) National Initiatives." (Nelson, 1991) Seemingly lost in all the rhetoric was the fact that Extension, from the day it was established, had been addressing "issues" of one kind or another. Clearly the intent was to create a programmatic framework within which Extension could be portrayed as being "at the cutting edge" (to use a bromide apparently popular with extension authors).

The initiatives/issues vs core programs permutations have apparently stabilized - at least for the moment. However, the former uncertainties, retrospectively, may have been good for extension in the long run. In its attempts to respond to the changing national agenda, extension was forced to seek and forge new coalitions both within land-grant institutions as well as in nonacademic circles. Presumably these new relationships will be advantageous to extension as it confronts the even more complex problems and issues which surely lie ahead. Other changes, as well, can be expected to remold the face of extension.

In an earlier paper (Vitzthum, 1991) I projected a "vision" of extension beyond the year 2000. I suggested that 20 years or so into the future, extension might not still be part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. My reasoning was that the organizations in which extension is rooted - i.e. the U.S. Department of Agriculture and land-grant institutions - are basically conservative and resistant to change. Retrospectively, I was at least half right. Little did I know then that 13 months later U.S. voters would elect a new president who would have as one of his principal interests the reinvention of government - starting with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Scarcely two months into the new administration, USDA Secretary Mike Espy announced plans for restructuring the agency. Those plans called for the Cooperative Extension System to become part of a new Farm Program Services administration along with the Agricultural Stabilization & Conservation Service (ASCS), the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) and Farmers Home Administration (FmHA). This was seen as facilitating "one-stop-shopping" for producers seeking access to federal program assistance (Keeping Up, 1993(1)).

Like many inventions, Secretary Espy's prototype had some defects. Under his initial plan, extension's liaisons with the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), Cooperative States Research Service (CSRS), and the National Agricultural Library (NAL) would have been organizationally severed. Moreover, it would have focused Extension almost exclusively in the agricultural arena, a turn of events which would have appealed to many of the organization's critics. In addition, there was concern that extension could have been called upon to perform certain quasi-regulatory functions.

The Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) was quick to point out these and other shortcomings in hearings on the reorganization proposal (Carpenter, 1993). After a return to the drawing board, a revised plan was offered in October 1993. The latest plan would have extension become part of a new agency with ARS, CSRS and NAL. The agency would be called the Agricultural Research and Education Service and report to the Assistant Secretary for Agricultural Research and Economics. The National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges has already testified in opposition to this plan primarily because the organizational titles appear to diminish the importance of the education function, and this in turn diminishes the importance of land-grant institutions.

Regardless of its final outcome, the USDA reorganization process is only the latest of many "wind shifts" that without question will push extension in new directions. Controlling the direction could be problematic, due at least in part to the fact that extension has failed to adequately market itself as a public organization.

Perhaps one of the more candid assessments of this problem appears in a task force report prepared for the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy in late 1991. The task force was co-chaired by two leading extension administrators: Patrick G. Boyle of Wisconsin and Zerle Carpenter of Texas. Titled "Building Effective Support for Extension in the 1990's," the report said, "The challenge facing the Cooperative Extension System in the highly competitive arena of the 1990's is to clearly communicate the value of its mission and program." The report goes on to charge that "...there has been no long-range, Systemwide, comprehensive strategy for consistent, continuous, clear communications about the constantly changing programs of the Cooperative Extension System and their value to people." (Boyle & Carpenter, 1991) The report calls on the extension system nationwide to develop a strategy for marketing the organization emphasizing for "traditional, new and potential supporters" the relevance of its programs in a changing society as well as its continuing commitment to agriculture.

More changes are virtually inevitable for extension, and as we have seen, some are taking place now. Other developments will also have a profound impact on the extension system of the future:

- Interactive satellite videoconferencing as well as audio teleconferencing are becoming a regular part of both inservice training for extension personnel and in day-to-day educational program delivery. (Dillon, 1993)

- Some states are sharing agricultural experiment station facilities and personnel across state lines. (Aylsworth, 1993)

- Several states, including Nebraska, are exploring the feasibility of - or have already implemented - CD-ROM systems allowing instant access to, and local printout of, extension educational resources.

While these and other changes taking place are timely and necessary, are they enough? How must Cooperative Extension change <u>fundamentally</u> in order to cope with clientele needs a decade or more from now?

A Leadership Roundtable was convened earlier this year to review the 32 recommendations in the controversial 1987 Futures Task Force report. The Roundtable conferees developed a list of imperatives in response to those questions:

1) Develop a Strategic Plan for the System.

2) Strengthen the capability of Extension faculty.

3) Resolve to better serve agriculture and address the high-tech commercial agriculture issue.

4) Establish a process to create centers/networks of excellence that can be accessed readily throughout the nationwide system.

5) Improve the knowledge base and cooperation/communication among directors/administrators.

6) Develop a system for issue/clientele identification using concepts from market research.

7) Develop a "Bill of Rights" for Extension customers.

8) Develop, through the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC), models for both gaining access to the total resources of the university for outreach and providing outreach from the total university.

9) Examine and evaluate the institutional linkages at the federal level, including a re-examination of the Smith/Lever Act.

10) Review the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP)/NASULGC structure.

11) Continue system emphasis on diversity.

12) Continue and strengthen the system's emphasis on building partnerships and coalitions. (Bolen, 1993)

If the winds of change experienced by extension thus far can be considered strong, the changes implied by some of the imperatives are cause for posting tornado or hurricane watches.

Some of the imperatives (e.g. numbers 2, 3, 5) are fundamentally organizational maintenance. They represent actions that extension needs to take regardless of other considerations.

Implementation of others (e.g. establishment of centers of excellence) are fraught with budget implications. Absent a radical departure from present budget trends, especially at the state level (or substantial grants), this will be difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish.

Other imperatives, such as number 8, represent major change. Some institutions, such as Wisconsin, have already merged Cooperative Extension with other extension activities of the institution. In most cases, however, general/university extension functions have developed along parallel tracks with Cooperative Extension. Colleges of business, engineering, education, and others have a well-defined niche in the education dissemination business. There can be no question that the problems, issues and educational needs emerging today are interdisciplinary and need interdisciplinary solutions and responses. Appropriate mechanisms must be found to blend the two extensions, capitalizing on the strengths of each and preserving to the extent possible the rapport that each has built with their respective constituencies.

While it is important - indeed essential - that we examine potential future directions for Cooperative Extension, there is an inherent weakness in that approach. Cooperative Extension is only one of the three elements comprising land-grant institutions. It is irrational to expect that unilateral changes by Cooperative Extension will be effective. As Schuh (1991) and others (National Research Council Board of Agriculture, not dated) have long contended, land-grant institutions are in serious need of revitalization. But progress in this direction will be made only one step at a time.

For Cooperative Extension's adult educators, there are several critical issues; here are only a few:

- How must land-grant institutions be redirected in order to be most responsive to the changing needs of both agriculture and society as a whole? Teaching? Research? Extension?

- How can extension reconstitute a broad base of public support - moral and fiscal - within the framework of present social, political and economic constraints?

- How valid is the Cooperative Extension System model for dealing with the problems, issues and educational needs that can be expected to emerge over the next decade (i.e. publicly supported educational programs delivered in informal settings)?

There are no easy answers to any of them. Only one thing is clear as we continue through the remaining years of the decade: bring along a jacket; expect more winds of change.

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