

What is the Role of Extension Educators in the First Decade of the Twenty-First Century?

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Abstract

The cooperative extension service faces various changes in society that will affect its funding, programming methodology, and mission over the next five years. Most of the changes have begun to occur and to have an impact on extension and university outreach. This study utilizes a literature review, primary data analysis, and personal experience to describe a set of major trends and issues facing cooperative extension over the next five years. From this, recommendations are presented for the role that cooperative extension should play to continue to be a leading source of university outreach.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s many authors (*Bell 1973; Toffler 1981; Naisbitt 1982; Hawken 1983*) wrote about an ongoing transition to a service-based information economy in North America. As we enter the twenty-first century, no one views these thoughts as speculation. Instead, the focus of most organizations' corporate culture has moved to constant change and speculation. Futuring, strategic planning, and other organizational change tools are being used by organizations to help position them for the future.

This paper represents an attempt to do some futuring based on current trends and literature, and then to make some suggestions regarding the future roles of extension educators in Ohio. Most of these observations can be made about other extension services in the United States. Given the ongoing effects of globalization, many of these trends and implications can be extrapolated to other countries as well.

Trends Affecting Extension

Information: Much discussion in futurism focuses on the move to an information-based society. In Ohio and North America the number of citizens with Internet access, cellular phones, and other information tools has continued to rise. This trend has transferred power from institutions (such as libraries and health providers) to individuals. A key trend in the information revolution is a change

in the choices that citizens have as consumers of information. Because of access to the Internet and other information technology sources, citizens may now search the entire world for sources of information without leaving their homes. Typical extension clientele now have multiple sources of information, inaccurate. Extension is now less likely to be viewed as a provider of timely, research-based information.

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Changing Demographics: As in much of the United States, the population in Ohio continues to grow older and more diverse. There has been an increase in the number of people of Hispanic origin in the state, and a significant increase in the number of people in the 45-54 age group. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of people in this age group grew by 41 percent. Changing

demographics mean that audiences for extension work are also changing. A significant part of the population now consists of older baby boomers (people born between 1946 and 1964). As they continue to age, programming will need to be adjusted to take into account their needs and considerations. For example, aging boomers are interested in retirement planning, health issues, and estate planning. As Ohio's population continues to diversify on racial and origin lines, so must the programming offered by extension.

Globalization: Globalization, or the economic and cultural impact of cultures from other countries, is a topic discussed often in extension circles. Due to changes in information technology and increased freedom in economic markets, events that occur in other parts of the world have a direct affect in Ohio and other locations. Markets across the world can impact agriculture, communities, and individuals in Ohio.

Economic Changes: For much of the 1990s, Ohio and the United States went through a transition into a “new economy.” The term new economy has become synonymous with various technology companies, but it is much more than that. The new economy refers to the use of new information technologies (computers, electronic mail, networking, faxes, etc.), globalization, and changes in organizational management. These changes are utilized not just by technology companies (e.g., Internet companies) but by traditional companies as well. Companies have completely reorganized their systems of maintaining inventory, purchasing, etc. by utilizing

business-to-business Internet connections and payments. This has a dramatic effect on communities in Ohio because it forces all producers and vendors to be competitive. It opens up markets to goods produced elsewhere, and increases the likelihood of purchasing supplies from other parts of the world.

Agriculture in Ohio continues to come under pressures from foreign competition as well as from other regions of the United States. Traditional agricultural industries such as dairies are reorganizing in order to take advantage of large economies of scale.

The changes of the new economy have also led to increased disintermediation, that is, decreases in the number of transactions that involve middlemen and other suppliers. Because of the changes in information technology, consumers and extension clientele can now bypass local offices and other middle-based providers to go directly to the source of information, supplies, and so on.

Sustainable Development/Quality of Life: Sustainable development and quality of life issues have become a major concern in Ohio and throughout the United States. Ohio's population continues

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to move from central cities to suburbs to rural fringe areas. While this creates opportunities for those communities, it also creates various land use conflicts. Ohio's population has also become more affluent and more concerned about environmental quality issues. Most communities are now interested in effective and sustainable community planning as well as economic growth.

These changes have led to increased social pressures on agriculture and related activities. Agriculture is now scrutinized for

run-off, water contamination, odors, and other environmental and nuisance issues. While most people are still supportive of agriculture, many are fearful of larger, consolidated agricultural operations, especially livestock operations. An additional fear linked to agriculture, community development, and family and consumer sciences is the rise of biotechnology. A debate about the future of food continues as citizens disagree sharply on the pros and cons of biotechnology (Charles 2001).

Returning to Our Roots—The Engaged Institution: Political support for extension programming in the United States has remained concentrated in rural and agricultural areas. The early history of extension was directed at improving the lives of people. More specifically, the Smith-Lever Act states, "To aid in diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture and home economics and to encourage the application of the same" (*Rasmussen 1989*). When this act was passed, the population of the United States was primarily rural, depending on subsistence and small-scale agriculture. As agricultural productivity increased and industrialization continued, fewer people came to depend on agriculture. Today less than 10 percent of the U.S. population depends directly on agricultural production. However, the agricultural and food industry continues to be a major influence on the economy of the United States.

Funding of extension organizations continues to change. Support from federal sources has remained relatively constant over the last two decades, but the real effect has been significantly reduced buying power of those federal dollars. State and county support has continued to increase in most states. This shift has resulted in states and counties paying an ever-increasing percentage of support for extension programs. These funding changes cause states' extension programs to evolve in directions unique to each state's political situation. Strong agricultural states have programs that expend most resources in agricultural and rural issues. States with higher urban populations and less dependence on agriculture are evolving faster in the areas of human and community development.

The changing view of scholarship in higher education appears to be much more extension friendly. Boyer's (1990) definition of scholarship has caused many leaders in higher education to look beyond research to application and integration of knowledge in addition to teaching and discovery. This shifting view of scholarship and an increased understanding by university leaders of the political benefits of public service have resulted in attempts to conduct outreach and engagement programs throughout the university. Many universities are looking to Extension to lead these efforts with university-wide extension. Others see extension as part of a mosaic of entities that provide educational programs and service beyond the university walls. Often these changes cause extension to expand in responsibility without additional resources. In other cases new intellectual and financial resources are expanding the impact of programs.

Implications

These trends and issues have various implications on the work being conducted by extension educators in Ohio. The increased use and availability of information technology means that Ohio consumers can access immeasurable amounts of data from their own homes. Extension educators will continue to play a crucial role in helping people analyze that data and turn it into knowledge. Extension will need to continue to improve its online capabilities (what is now known as e-extension).

Most extension organizations have significant investment in infrastructure for e-extension, but content and methods adaptation are significantly behind the growth of infrastructure. The high-touch orientation of extension educators continues to be a barrier. Extension educators must adapt and refine teaching methods, and develop content appropriate for delivery through Web sites and two-way video. While these should be important delivery tools, educators should also be mindful that people who have access or ability to use these tools may vary greatly in their competence and comfort with such technologies.

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Extension educators will need to continue to provide timely and useful localized information. Since each of Ohio's eighty-eight counties has extension offices, localized applied and action research can benefit local clientele. Ideally, clientele will be involved in this research and have ownership of it as well.

The public's access to information has increased the need to teach critical thinking skills. Extension educators can capitalize on extension's traditional niche of supplying unbiased information. Educators should help clientele better understand how to discriminate between biased information provided through electronic and other mediums and to seek and select information to help solve their unique questions. In essence, educators must shift from being information providers to helping people and communities solve complex problems. Extension educators are no longer the only expert, but one of many. However, Extension educators do have the ability to help (and most importantly, teach) people to analyze and use data. Usable data becomes information, which can then be used to address issues and concerns.

Programs must offer real and measurable value to clientele and contribute to the public good. This is true in agriculture but may be more important when working with non-ag audiences. Programs that do not contribute to the public good will be questioned by decision makers and should be among the programs offered for fees high enough to recover total costs.

Extension educators have a niche in the discovery of new information through applied or action research (including within their own profession—see *Jarvis 1999*). Educators have often prided themselves on being teachers, but they must recognize their unique position as public servants attached to the university. In this role, educators must develop and hone skills in research to discover new information to solve problems locally with a minimum of time investment.

Change has become a natural and expected phenomenon among extension organizations. The pace of this change is often difficult to predict or regulate. As these organizations adapt to changes in society and try to serve an ever-increasing audience, traditional support bases must continue at current or even higher levels. Moving to university-wide extension and into more human and community development and urban programs may bring excitement and opportunity, but such moves should also bring additional resources and new political support and should deliver real and measurable impact.

Teaching and professional and public service have long been considered strengths of extension educators. Today and in the future extension educators must focus on the scholarly aspects of their work. With the changing view of scholarship, they should capitalize on their strengths in teaching and the application and integration of knowledge. These strengths should be communicated and recognized in the universities and professional organizations. In addition, the scholarship of discovery must be developed through appropriate research and shared in traditional and new outlets. Educators must consider their work scholarly and treat it as such.

In order to be successful in the future, extension must expand its circle of influence within the university. Taking the extra steps to be recognized as scholars will bring greater access to resources and influence within the university systems. These expanded resources and influence will help provide better and more comprehensive service to individuals and communities.

As in the university, extension must expand its partnerships within the community, state, and nation. Locally it must reach out to new partners for access to audiences and resources. Nationally in the United States and in the individual states, extension must reach

out to other departments if it is to expand beyond its agricultural roots. Extension cannot expect to use resources allocated through congressional agricultural committees to reach out to non-agricultural audiences. With this expansion, state and national support groups must recognize extension's potential and its contributions to solving complex problems. Organizations like Farm Bureau and commodity organizations cannot and should not be expected to champion or support growth beyond agriculture and rural programs.

In the communities, educators must likewise develop linkages well beyond those of the past. Understanding how to link similar interests and resources in local communities has long been recognized as a distinctive contribution of extension educators. Today's and tomorrow's complex problems will require a broader circle of influence to be effective. Building these linkages before they are needed will increase extension's effectiveness as the issues arise.

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