LEGITIMACY AND SUPPORT FOR EXTENSION: A PUBLIC POLICY ISSUE

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Is extension in trouble?

Max Lennon, in the 1988 Seaman A. Knapp Memorial Lecture, states: "Critics say Extension has outlived its usefulness. It's in a tug-of-war. The recessionary years, drought, and especially the current administration's efforts early in 1986 to drastically reduce federal support, have left Extension leaders 'hearing footsteps'" (p. 4).

Ron Knutson states: "The evidence is increasing that Cooperative Extension, if not the agriculture component of the land-grant university system itself, may be unraveling" (p. 1293).

Both the General Accounting Office (GAO) and the United States Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) have criticized extension's ability to set priorities among activities and constituencies. It is claimed that extension is more concerned with organizational maintenance than achieving education. Conversations among university presidents and deans of agriculture often include this question: "What are you doing about extension in your state?"

While the administration's recent attempts to reduce federal support for extension were thwarted by Congress, extension still confronts declining real levels of federal support and will confront future attempts to reduce budgets at federal, state and local levels. Changes in the extension system are under way to help cope with actual and perceived organizational and programmatic failures. Restructuring of the Extension Committee on Organization and Policies (ECOP) and the move to issue/initiatives programming is a part of the system's response.

The purpose of this presentation is to discuss the legitimacy and support of extension as public policy issues. Legitimacy and support of an organization are interrelated. If an organization loses its legitimacy it can no longer sustain itself in the social system. No amount of power can keep an organization alive if there is widespread denial of the legitimacy of its role in society. The reason is that continued performance of any role requires an acceptance of legitimacy on the part of those who are affected. For example, the ability of ex-

tension to receive public support depends upon the willingness of the citizens and legislators to provide funding. On the other hand, if the users of extension do not view its role as relevant they will not use it and thus extension will not serve a useful purpose.

Policy Issues

The public policy issues regarding extension are interrelated and complex; issues are nested within issues. Decisions seldom can be made about them individually. There is no single decision body to resolve these issues. The issues will be resolved by a combination of federal, state and local legislatures; land grant university administrators; administrators of extension; extension workers; and their students.

Rasmussen suggests this set of issues which affects the legitimacy and support of extension:

Mission

The general mission of extension defined in the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 is "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."

In 1988 the Cooperative Extension system adopted the following mission statement: "The Cooperative Extension system helps people improve their lives through an educational process which uses scientific information focused on issues and needs." This, as Rasmussen observes, bases "programs on issues unbounded by discipline, audiences or geography" (p. 223).

A major issue of technology transfer versus broader education has come to the fore. This issue can be stated in terms of whether to have a sharply focused or broad mission to respond to the educational needs of the country. Should extension's mission continue to be fraught with tensions, pluralisms and ambiguities or should it be more sharply focused, say on technology transfer in agriculture?

The mission of extension has been an issue throughout its history. Early extension work concentrated on farmers, their families and rural areas even though it was difficult to obtain the interest and support of most farmers and families. Farming, farm families and rural America have changed. All are linked to, and a part of, worldwide, complex and interdependent social, political and economic systems. Changes in emphasis between and within traditional extension program areas of agriculture, family, youth and community development and the current focus on issue programming reflect efforts to deal with this issue.

Who Should Extension Serve?

In extension's early years the answer to this question was clear: farmers and their families who were all rural, had about the same size farms and generally had low income.

The answer to the question is not as clear now. Research-based knowledge is desired by urban residents for horticultural, family economics, nutrition and youth programs. Community leaders and local government officials also desire research-based knowledge to deal with their problems. The well-being of farm families and rural residents depends on economic activity other than farming.

A decision on who extension should serve impacts other issues, especially the management structure of extension. A decision on this issue also affects funding, mission and the relation of extension to the university. Staff, budget and campus power are at stake.

Assume a decision on the issue and you will find other sets of issues nested within. If the decision is made to provide educational services only for farmers and their families we now have the question of which farmers to serve—large, small or middle-sized? How should resources be allocated between farm decision needs and family decision needs? Where do the needs of youth fit? Other sets of issues emerge if another "solution" is chosen.

How to Manage the System?

A strength and weakness of extension is the cooperative nature of the system. A number of groups think they do or should manage the system: county workers and their constituencies, state administrators, specialists, Congressmen and United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) officials. Extension's legitimacy and support has been continued because there is some truth in the perceptions of each group.

What would happen to extension if there were less chauvinism and more cooperation among the managers? United States Extension is not a USDA line agency as is the case in most other countries. What are the roles of federal, state and county offices? Where will the functions of anticipatory planning and program delivery best be performed in the future—at the county, state or federal level? What is the role of subject-matter departments, specialists and field staff in planning and delivery and within a state? What is the role of the user versus the extension worker in problem definition and curriculum development?

Answers to these questions will greatly impact the legitimacy and funding support for extension.

While the provisions of the Smith-Lever Act were adopted by all the states soon after its passage, a number of "who-will-do-what-for-

whom problems" had to be worked out. Among them were the relationships of the state agricultural colleges and the USDA, as well as the relationship between the counties and states. During the New Deal of the 1930s problems between extension and various federal agencies were worked out.

The interaction of how to manage the system and who is to be served is very large. Many faculty members and administrators of land grant colleges of agriculture are convinced that extension should limit itself to commercial agriculture. Other educators and many extension workers are convinced survival lies only in efforts to serve urban and family constituencies as well as constituencies interested in increased rural economic development.

Funding

The issue of funding involves how much should be provided by federal, state and local governments and by other sources.

In the 1980s, few state extension services have escaped significant staff cuts. Federal funding has decreased in real terms by 25 percent. State funding has increased relative to federal and local support. But financial support has been reduced in those states which are farm, energy and natural resource dependent. Alternative funding sources have been developed in several states. These sources include foundation grants, subcontracts from other agencies (especially federal), contributions from the private sector (especially for 4-H) and modest increases in user fees.

Federal grants appear to stimulate state spending even when the matching share has been exceeded according to Rose-Ackerman and Evenson. They suggest the level of public spending for agricultural research and extension is quite substantial given the small size of the farm population and that democratic governments will support productivity-enhancing programs where the ultimate gains are obtained by consumers even though the initial benefits are rather narrowly concentrated.

Relation to the Land Grant University

The long-run ability of extension to perform is integral to the pool of problem-solving research available and the ability of extension to influence the research agenda. What should (or might be) the relationship of extension with the various colleges: agriculture, home economics, arts and science, etc? While extension is administered in the college of agriculture in most states, there are important interrelationships and connections with the other colleges.

In the past some people viewed extension as a funnel through which research results were poured to the users of the knowledge. Changes are occurring. In many states there has been an increase in

applied research by extension. This is brought about in most land grant universities by the move toward disciplinary and basic research with a decline in public formula funds and an increase in efforts to obtain grants from federal or private agencies. Thus the proportion of research information directly useful for problem solving has declined and extension is attempting to fill this gap. The ability of extension to influence the research agenda has decreased with this shift. Many extension workers do not feel they have an adequate research base to provide education on problems in their program areas.

Don Holt, Director of the Illinois Agriculture Experiment Station, argues that a viable competitive strategy for U.S. agriculture is stronger programs of site- and situation-specific agricultural research and a superior delivery system for agricultural production technology. Persons interested in program areas of rural revitalization, health and nutrition, family living and other extension educational programs could make similar arguments.

Two proposals under consideration at the federal level could have impact on the relationships of extension to the research system. One is a $500 million competitive grants research program for USDA developed by the National Research Council's Board on Agriculture and supported by a coalition of agricultural organizations, including the National Association of Land Grant Colleges and State Universities. The other is the resurfacing of a proposal to merge USDA's Cooperative State Research Service with the Extension Service. Would the adoption of one or both of these proposals increase or decrease the problem solving research knowledge base and the linkage between research and extension?

The linkages between classroom instruction and extension have not received much attention. There may be a number of unexplored opportunities for a closer relationship. It has often occurred to me that joint appointments between teaching and extension could lead to improvements in both teaching and extension. However, there are very practical scheduling problems. There appears to be some growing interest in collaboration between community colleges and extension that might facilitate a useful interaction between teaching and extension.

Alternatives and Consequences

There is not a neat set of issues facing society and extension. The set of issues is interrelated and, as mentioned before, there are issues nested within issues. What follows is an attempt to provide a set of broad alternative solutions to the issues and some indication of their likely consequences. The alternatives and consequences are not neatly and clearly defined. Each represents a direction to go rather than a well-marked road map.

It would be easier to provide an analysis of alternatives and consequences if there were a single decision body. Decisions about the future of extension will be made by various federal agencies and Congress, by various state agencies and state legislatures, by county government, by land grant university administration, by extension administration, by extension workers, and finally (perhaps most importantly) by the users of extension. Various points of view and perspectives exist within this list. And, of course, coalitions exist among the actors.

Two significant issues in each alternative are not discussed in detail. One is new methods of program delivery. Cooperative efforts across state lines and increased use of electronic technology are examples. Funding limits will probably require the adoption of methods that will enable the system to "do more with less." The other is the inclusion of social, environmental and ethical aspects in problem definition as well as consequences for each alternative. Many groups and individuals have equity and environmental concerns and express them in a way that can influence support and legitimacy for extension.

Agricultural Technology Transfer

This alternative would have extension put its major thrust on providing information and education that would increase the productivity of U.S. agriculture. It would focus importantly on farmers but not be limited to farmers. It would provide information for agribusiness, both input and processing. This system would bring scientific and technical findings to site-specific production settings, disseminate these findings and educate farmers and related firms to the efficient uses of these new approaches. A balance between "technology-push" and "user-pull" strategies would have to be developed.

If this alternative were chosen, a number of decisions would remain. Equity questions exist. Would the focus be on the relatively small number of commercial farmers who produce the majority of the product? How much attention would be placed on the much larger numbers of small, modest sized and part-time farmers? Will education efforts be made to increase farm family well-being, say by increasing off-farm income, or only to increase productivity? Another question to be answered is whether increasing productivity will increase competitiveness with other countries and benefit the consumer as well as increase income of farmers and the agricultural industry. In addition, problems of environmental, social and ethical consequences of modern farm technology call for a broad concept of productivity and efficiency. Technology transfer with a limited and traditional concept of efficiency may not well serve society or farmers.

A consequence of choosing this alternative would be a change in

the structure of extension. Clearly, less emphasis would be placed on family, youth and community development activities. County staff numbers would likely decline and the number of regional and state specialists would increase. The linkage of the extension system to state experiment stations and federal research agencies would increase. This would take the form of increased applied research by extension to obtain site-specific information or joint efforts to produce this knowledge. Opportunities to link with the private research systems would need to be explored.

Public policy education would continue to be important. International trade policy, macroeconomic policy and environmental policy would probably receive more attention. Education for the management of production and marketing systems would likely increase as would linkages to the agriculture input sector and the processing and distribution sector.

The implications for support and legitimacy of extension are not clear. Clearly commercial agricultural interests would likely increase support if the new thrust were well done. But rural well-being is not determined by farm well-being. Thus, the support of rural users of extension in the areas of family, youth and community development could decrease significantly. This could have significant impact on local and state support. Federal support could well increase in the short run. It appears there is considerable support in the general public for assisting farmers, especially if there is understanding that such efforts would increase productivity, lower food prices and increase competitiveness. However, if attention were not given to small and lower income farmers and the program were viewed as helping the "big, rich farmers" only, there could be a sizable decline in support.

The benefits to society from an increase in agricultural productivity from extension education are important. Econometric studies cited in *Evaluation of Economic and Social Consequences of Cooperative Extension Programs* published in 1980 estimate internal return rates of 30 to 60 percent for public agricultural research and extension as well as indicating that marginal rates of return to research and extension were similar. However, a recent publication by Huffman and Evenson, two of the authors cited in the 1980 publication, estimate the social internal rate of return is 62 percent for public research on grain farms but near zero for extension. The authors state: "The poor payoff to Extension is puzzling, but evidence on returns to Extension have been mixed" (p. 771). If these results are confirmed by additional studies, will there be support for the agricultural technology transfer alternative?

Initiative Programming

The alternative of initiative programming is the direction in which the Cooperative Extension System is moving. The system has se-

lected nine critical areas as national priority initiatives for the 1990s. They are: 1) competitiveness and profitability in American agriculture; 2) alternative agricultural opportunities; 3) conservation and management of natural resources; 4) water quality; 5) revitalizing rural America; 6) improving nutrition, diet and health; 7) family and economic well-being; 8) building human capital; and 9) youth at risk.

These problems were chosen to meet national needs and were developed by an interaction between federal and state concerns through ECOP and Extension Service/USDA. The initiatives provide a framework for programs developed at the local level to meet local needs while "bunching" them in terms of important national needs. It is expected the initiatives would change over time as changes in problems at the local and national levels are recognized and identified.

Extension's constituents would be more diverse with this alternative than the agriculture technology transfer alternative. The constituents would consist of those people who have a need for education on the initiatives selected. While agricultural constituents would continue to be significant, new constituent groups will emerge.

The consequences for the extension system are unfolding. Clearly extension activities across traditional program areas of agriculture, youth, family and community development will increase. The extension role of the subject matter departments in the land grant university will change. More emphasis is placed on the ability of a particular subject matter to make a contribution to a problem rather than being the basis of a program. Tensions between subject matter departments and initiative programs are emerging. The initiatives were not defined in terms of subject matter. Also, many extension people working on specific initiatives believe they do not have sufficient research base to deal with the program.

There also appears to be tension between the local extension systems and the state and federal system. Local extension workers and citizens do not feel that the problems in their counties exist in the same proportion as state and national emphasis and some see initiative programming as a top-down process.

It is too early to determine the impact of this alternative on support for extension at the federal, state and local levels. Extension has clearly made the argument that by choosing national problems it is dealing with national needs and thus should have increased federal support. At the federal, state and local levels there are people interested in each of the individual areas. However, coalitions among these supporters need to be further developed and nurtured. The agricultural sector is uncertain if they will lose or gain from a large number of initiatives rather than a focus on agriculture. The extension workers and their supporters within a program area are uneasy. But the potential for broad based support and legitimacy for extension with this alternative exists. It clearly is within the tradition

of extension helping people help themselves with problems the people think are important.

This alternative deals with the criticism of extension's lack of ability to set priorities among activities and constituencies. It also provides a way to deal with the urban versus rural constituency issue.

Nonformal, Off-Campus Education

The alternative of nonformal, off-campus education would focus extension's effort on education rather than knowledge transfer. It holds that extension's educational mission is to educate people to solve real-world problems.

Henderson characterizes this alternative in the following sentence: "The compelling need is to teach career-oriented people how to further develop, use and improve their cognitive skills, that is, how to become better thinkers" (p. 1131).

With this alternative, extension would provide nonformal, off-campus education to meet the educational needs of individuals willing to participate in learning experiences.

Selection of this alternative would probably lead to merger or very close linkages between traditional Cooperative Extension and general extension functions of the university. In a number of states, Cooperative Extension is already a part of the general extension unit of the university. It would also likely lead to closer linkages with the community college systems.

It is difficult to predict the general consequences of choosing this alternative. Clearly the potential for legitimacy and support is very large as extension would develop means of delivering off-campus, nonformal education on a broad range of problems. It is my observation that the support of the community colleges in most states is increasing more rapidly than support for the major research universities in those states. It is possible to develop a scenario in which in the next twenty years states will not support their major research universities with state funds, but instead will support those educational activities that respond more to the needs of full-time and part-time students.

The choice of this alternative would likely reduce support from the traditional agricultural areas. The youth, family and community development areas could be increased or decreased under this alternative, but the possibility exists for increased support.

The role of the county staff would likely be more that of an educational coordinator than an educator. They would spend much of their time arranging for the nonformal educational experiences. This approach would bring a closer linkage between the subject matter faculty and students in deciding what ought to be taught. It could well bring a closer linkage between individual students and the re-

search process than now exists. It would lead extension educators to consider each lesson within a broader context of courses and total learning experiences rather than an effort in information/technology transfer. While such an approach would establish education rather than organizational maintenance as the major mission of extension, it might lead to renewed evidence for the criticism of extension being all things to all people.

Some Combination of Alternatives

There is always the possibility of some combination of the alternatives listed above. For example, the alternatives of agricultural technology transfer or initiative programming could be combined with a heavier emphasis on nonformal, off-campus classroom education.

Agricultural technology transfer could be given a larger role and priority in the issues programming alternatives. Extension in the 21st Century will likely be some combination of the above alternatives and/or those not identified.

The consequences of the combination of alternatives will be a mix of the consequences identified for the alternatives identified. Thus no specific statement of consequences for the combination alternative can be made.

Conclusion

Extension's 75th anniversary has been celebrated. That is not an old age for an organization that serves society. It is with optimism for extension's future I ask: What will extension be when it grows up? For a young person the answer to that question depends on genetics, childhood experiences and learning, further learning, opportunities and luck. So will it be for extension.

How extension serves society in its mature phase depends on the system and society. There is need for society and the participants in the system to understand the issues, alternatives and consequences facing extension. I don't know what it will be when it grows up, but I think it can be as useful as it was in its early years.

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