

Looking at the Future of Cooperative Extension Work

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The original goal of Cooperative Extension work, as specified by the Congress of the United States in the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, was to diffuse among the people of the country useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture and home economics. This goal was to be reached through instruction, practical demonstrations, publications, and "otherwise." The act could be altered, amended, or repealed by congressional action. This act promoted, via federal sponsorship, a mode of public education that was already in use in

some states. It was prompted by the needs of the majority of citizens who resided in rural areas to learn about new ways to produce crops and enhance the quality of life in a sometimes harsh environment. The Morrill and Hatch acts had provided for facilities and funding for research relevant to agriculture and home economics, but relatively few citizens had access to the results. Under the Smith-Lever Act, the Cooperative Extension Service and its counterparts in the individual states (collectively, Cooperative Extension) provided this access and grew into partnership with the teaching and research programs of the land-grant universities. The partnership has become so close that some faculty members now serve in all three functions.

When I was asked to write about the challenges and changes facing Cooperative Extension, many subjects came to mind. On a broad scale, the problem of identity and recognition for Cooperative Extension overrides and influences most of the subject matter areas. A national survey of adults has shown that Cooperative Extension is likely to be known for what it does, but that its name is unfamiliar to many people. While 77 and 52% of the respondents knew about 4-H and agricultural programs, respectively, only 40% remembered hearing of Cooperative Extension. However, 87% of the respondents recognized either the name or the programs. It thus appears that Cooperative Extension should put its name forward with its programs if it is to compete favorably for public recognition or funding.

Most surveys demonstrate that users of Cooperative Extension are highly satisfied with its programs and service. Satisfaction was greater as the interaction increased. It has been my observation that leaders of the agricultural community depend heavily on information from extension programs to maintain high yields and quality of commodities for marketing advantages. Satisfaction of users has been measured at 93 and 95% for agricultural and 4-H programs, respectively. If individual local situations are considered, variation in levels of satisfaction with and reliance upon Cooperative Extension does exist, however. This variation calls to attention the need for continual training of students who are motivated to apply their resourcefulness and their knowledge of agricultural science in the service of society. Educators in land-grant universities must realize that extension programs staffed by such people are critical elements for favorable town and gown relationships. In recent years, however, I have observed a reduction in the number of students in plant pathology who have the credentials necessary for applied positions in agricultural industry or extension. I believe it is important to motivate more young people toward such careers.

Volumes of literature describe new plant disease situations, damage caused by plant diseases, and approaches to disease control in the context of crop management. Extension plant pathologists who disseminate this information interact with many public and private agencies. Extension professionals in horticultural subject areas indicate that pest identification, pest control, and diagnostic techniques for plant disorders are the three most important areas of need for training. Thus, it appears that extension plant pathologists will have no shortage of work in the future. I believe, moreover, that plant pathologists must expend significantly more effort toward improving the quality of agricultural commodities. The message from consumers is clear—they want quality, not just quantity.

Up to this point, I have indicated that we in Cooperative Extension have been given a charge, have reached some goals, usually to the satisfaction of our clientele, and still have more to do. The transfer of technology will continue in the tradition of helping people help themselves, but extension personnel will face challenges in defining new programs and carrying them to the public.

The challenge in maintaining excellence and continuity of programs will be great. Government-funded budgets do not have the purchasing power required for many (if not most) extension programs. Also, individual states are "picking up more of the tab" for operating expenses and retirement systems. One disadvantage of this trend is that funds from local and state sources tend to ebb and flow in relation to short-term governmental needs and political agendas rather than remaining stable enough to support extension programs with long-term approaches and objectives. As a result, extension specialists may be obliged to alter programs before their objectives have been met. Such impromptu changes give the impression of poor planning and can result in a negative assessment from extension clientele. Program changes in extension plant pathology are also inevitably caused by changes in pathogen populations and disease situations. Therefore, extension specialists must design programs to include potential changes, so that clientele perceive adaptability rather than discontinuity.

Another challenge for extension workers is how best to use available time to keep up to date, serve the multitudes, and satisfy the evaluators. New research techniques, computers, and modern communications media can be powerful allies, but not until the extension worker has spent considerable time learning how to utilize them. Therefore, time for self-enhancement must be reserved as extension programs are planned. If a sabbatical leave is not appropriate, other arrangements must be made by the individual.

It has been interesting to observe the varied attitudes of extension personnel toward litigation, mass media, and consulting firms. Lawyers, journalists, and consultants all have roles to play and will continue to ask extension specialists for information. I have been impressed with the general effectiveness of agriculturally oriented mass media and consultants in delivering information about crop production in a positive way. The challenge for extension personnel is to enhance the reliability of information that flows between such sources and the public.

The future of Cooperative Extension will depend on agents and specialists building upon the enviable tradition of 75 years of educational service. Extension personnel at all levels must realize that stable support for programming will depend on making clear to clientele that the demonstrations, publications, presentations, and service are part of a coherent, integrated program. I am confident that if this clarification is accomplished and Cooperative Extension attracts talented students with a flare for working with people, we will continue to serve the public with distinction and satisfaction.