

Extension's Role in its Second Century

The world around Extension has changed since it was founded by the Smith Lever Act in 1914. The internet and the explosion of digital technologies have changed the ways people can connect, and dramatically increased the speed and constancy of access to all kinds of information. Events in distant global markets and geographies impact local opportunities and contexts rapidly. The generation dubbed the “Millennials” (born between 1980 and 1995) are emerging as a new and different segment of the workforce. In keeping with the rising pace and interconnectedness of our world, communities and individuals face more complex problems: climate change, meeting energy needs, poverty, hunger, public health challenges, resource scarcities, challenges to education systems, and so on.

Extension has a unique history, and has distinctive assets and strengths. As the institution rises to its second century, the Extension Reconsidered project asks: *What are the visions for its core role, and what must we consider as we weigh differing views of how we engage with youth, families, businesses and communities?* The following three views characterize and contrast perspectives on Extension's role. They are offered here as a basis for a discussion in the form of a “deliberative forum”. We want to emphasize that they are presented in a way that highlights contrasts while acknowledging that these views have commonalities and are not mutually exclusive.

The Question: *In the 21st Century, how can Cornell Cooperative Extension continue to be relevant, engaged, accessible, and valued in its work with NYS families and communities?*

View 1: Focus on providing highly regarded Evidence-Based educational programs

With budget pressures forcing difficult choices at all levels – locally, statewide, and nationally – Extension must be an ever-more mindful steward of resources, focusing its energies and assets on proven strategies for effective programming (specifically, Evidence-Based Programs¹) in order to ensure best use of scarce community resources and public funds.

View 2: Disseminate Research

Access to information has exploded with the internet, yet people are also flooded with mixed- or poor-quality or biased information that make it difficult for individuals, organizations, and communities to make good decisions. Extension's unique role as the bridge between Land Grant Universities and communities is to be a reliable source of objective, research-based information.

View 3: Integrate Community and University Knowledge

A unique Extension strength is educator expertise in facilitating dialog and connections that engage community partners working with faculty to address contemporary issues. These partnerships can lead to program and research relevance, more self-sustainable solutions, and adaptability as demographics and community needs evolve and change.

¹ Definitions of what counts as an “Evidence-Based Program” (EBP) vary somewhat. Generally, an EBP is a program whose effectiveness has been rigorously demonstrated (often requiring randomized controlled trials), that has been subjected to peer review, and has been formalized with curricula and manuals to ensure that it can be implemented with fidelity. In some subject areas, funders or other entities may specify a list of EBPs that are approved for use.

Actions and Tradeoffs

View 1: Focus on providing highly regarded Evidence-Based educational programs

Unique Strengths: Extension has a rich history of creating and delivering impactful educational programs, and a network of connections between researchers and educators

Corresponding Actions:

- Establish criteria for Evidence-Based Program selection; strengthen program development and the evolution of programs toward stronger evidence bases
- Give priority to Evidence-Based Programs and highlight the strength of the research base for programs
- Assess system decisions regarding organizational structure, human resources, fundraising, etc. for alignment with research-based program development, selection, and delivery
- Strengthen connections between faculty and specialized Extension educators (regionally, or otherwise) in order to ensure strong research-based programming
- Streamline and standardize procedures to reduce costs and enhance effectiveness

Tradeoffs:

- Reduced flexibility of programming, and more limited menu of program options
- May not fully reach out to new audiences; may tend to exclude historically under-served audiences
- Less room for innovation in program selection and adaptation to local needs
- Reduced scope for locally-originated community-specific programming, community knowledge and local expertise
- Unclear commitment to long-standing programs that communities may value highly, if external evidence base has not yet been established
- May preclude nimble responses to emerging problems and priorities
- Less value obtained from Extension's dispersed network of local offices and community ties

View 2: Disseminate Research

Unique strengths: Extension is adept at framing and interpreting research for the benefit of individuals, families, and communities.

Corresponding Actions:

- Establish standards for research quality and type of research for dissemination (only Cornell? Also other LGUs? All university research? Other?)
- Coordinate within and among the resulting research bases to integrate and broaden lines of research
- Hire and reward research-focused faculty and Extension staff on campus; focus locally-based Extension staff on communicating research results to target audiences
- Strengthen staff capacity to select from and synthesize the vast array of information that is available
- Diversify and streamline mechanisms for information dissemination
- Invest more in translating research for practice – research briefs, applied research projects, etc.

Tradeoffs:

- May be more difficult for multi-directional and multi-disciplinary flow of knowledge and expertise which may not fully incorporate critically important community-based knowledge and insights relevant to research and applied research
- May limit Extension work primarily to areas in which Cornell has research faculty; burden for other work is too high
- People and communities (and legislatures) may not feel “engaged” by and therefore have less “buy-in” with centrally-derived research solutions
- Community problems are often complex, requiring more than just streamlined technical or scientific solutions
- Impact on individual or community decision-making depends on practices and standards with regard to interpreting science and evidence, particularly when research findings conflict, when issues is controversial, and/or when local factors add to complexity

View 3: Integrate Community and University Knowledge

Unique strengths: The network of Extension offices and staff, whose relationships within communities and with researchers form a foundation for community engagement.

Corresponding Actions:

- Develop and strengthen Extension’s relationships with all sectors of the communities and regions of NYS, including those who have been under-represented in Extension work
- Promote multi-disciplinary research and Extension teams in order to bring the best of the research expertise into dialog with leaders and emerging leaders in communities and regions
- Invest in forward-looking analyses of emerging global and community issues, in order to be ready to engage with new needs, help communities and others maintain long-term focus in a short-term world
- Strengthen Extension capacity for integrating content-knowledge and process or facilitation skills; strengthen research base in best practices for participant and community engagement

Tradeoffs:

- Extension’s role (and Cornell’s role) may be less visible and it will be more difficult to identify and be recognized for (and therefore more difficult to get funder support for)
- For funders and constituencies primarily focused on economic development (“dollars and jobs”), this role for Extension may be difficult to defend. Metrics for success can be difficult to establish.
- Variation in problems and responses will require time-intensive investments of Extension resources that cannot be easily replicated and repeated
- Complexity of decisions needed on controversial issues exposes Extension faculty and staff to risks (to external or local funding, community relationships, program support)
- It is difficult, internally, to assess and manage staff roles and responsibilities in a more fluid environment
- Unclear commitment to traditional Extension strengths and approaches, and traditional program area structures

Discussion topics for all Views:

Implications for funding, outcome and impacts, visibility and recognition, staffing, professional development, partnering and collaborations, etc.