

## **Responses to the “Deliberative Forums” – Preliminary Report**

One of the ways CCE’s Extension Reconsidered project has promoted conversation in NYS is through “Deliberative Forums”. These are relatively structured conversations in which participants consider, in turn, three distinct perspectives on an issue and reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of each. The goals are to increase awareness and understanding of different perspectives on complex issues, and to bring to light the strengths and downsides of each one in a way that is constructive and less polarized.

Deliberative Forums were held in CCE Albany County, CCE Broome County, CUCE New York City, CCE Seneca County, and on Cornell campus. **More than 90 people** participated in these discussions (which were recorded), and 25 of those responded to an anonymous on-line follow-up survey. The discussions considered 3 stylized “Views” on what Extension’s role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be. These views were articulated in a handout, and although they were drawn from genuine and sometimes deeply-held perspectives on Extension, they were presented in somewhat stark form to highlight their distinctiveness for purposes of discussion.

### **Results:**

#### **Value of the Deliberative Forum Opportunity:**

The follow-up survey indicated that participants valued the perspectives and discussion, and would recommend it highly to many other groups. Fifteen respondents indicated that the discussions had raised aspects of Extension or its context that they had not considered before. Sixteen of the 25 respondents reported specific things that emerged in the discussion that surprised them. Half reported that they had increased their awareness or understanding of different perspectives on Extension “a lot” or “a great deal”.

#### **Comments and Themes:**

On balance a common, perhaps almost universal, response in the Forums was that Extension’s role should include a thoughtful mix of all of the “views”, and that an exclusive, singular model of the way forward would not fulfill Extension’s potential for engaging to improve lives and communities in NYS and beyond.

Preliminary thematic analysis of the Deliberative Forum recordings and the survey responses yields a number of themes in people’s responses to the Views. These are summarized below.

#### **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 Programs<sup>1</sup>) in order to ensure best use of scarce community resources and public funds.*

**Advantages** mentioned in the discussions included the importance of using tested strategies; the importance of knowing whether what you are doing works; “evidence-based” appeals to many funders; the value of narrowing the scope of work by prioritizing; and that for certain relatively timeless and widely relevant topics this is highly appropriate. **Concerns** were numerous, especially for rigid interpretations of “evidence-based”.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

Themes raised repeatedly included concern for loss of innovation; importance of diverse expertise in adapting for particular communities or populations; tendency to constrain and discourage smart resourceful professional educators; inherent bias toward majority populations and resulting exclusion of underserved and under-researched audiences; times and needs change and evidence takes a lot of time to build up; the menu of “approved” EBP programs is too limited to serve important needs; the most critical problems facing society are complex and emergent (e.g. climate change) and cannot be addressed by EBPs; “if it’s not evolving, it’s not science”; fidelity is very difficult to achieve in practice; EBPs are costly; the associated focus on numbers (delivery hours, participants) eliminates an important human element; reliance on EBPs sometimes excludes local evaluations; and timeliness: “My work needs to be relevant 3 years before something happens – if [EBP requirement] were my reality for Extension programs, Extension would be gone in 5 years.”

### **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.*

**Advantages** mentioned in the discussions included that research is important as a foundation for understanding what works; that this offers more flexibility than EBPs; that there are a lot of basic information needs and people need to be able to trust their source of information; that there’s a need to help in assessing and translating research to make it accessible. **Concerns** included that Cornell and other university research does not always reflect community needs; loss of faculty in some areas and extension appointments more generally can reduce access to research for Extension educators; people (especially younger generation) don’t recognize Extension as an important source of information; research results do not always align and this poses a challenge to educators that calls for restoring public issues education in Extension; that there is no such thing as “objective research”; research takes time and if all Extension is allowed to do is deliver research-based information then what can it do when a brand new problem arises; research results don’t necessarily generalize to all contexts and so may not be relevant; without communication and dialog, dissemination can become a one-way street – after all, “It’s not Cornell Extension, it’s Cornell Cooperative Extension.”

### **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.*

**Advantages** mentioned in the discussions included that this taps into Extension system’s distinctive strength which is relationships; this gives more of a voice to communities; getting out into communities will make programs more relevant; Extension has expertise in facilitating dialog and connections. **Concerns** included that there can be a disconnect with this because not all counties have equal access to or connections with campus researchers; the University does not fully recognize the value of this role; this is “the riskiest method of all” because public dialog is so polarized these days and you risk being branded; funders are not always willing to support this kind of work, especially on forward-looking issues; the question of “who is the community?” needs more careful attention; this requires skill sets related to networking and innovation and can’t be done’ on soft money.