

Extension in Flux: Country Cousin or Strategic Partner?

Thank you for that kind introduction. Good morning, (evening). I'm very happy to be here. Moreover, I'm glad to see that you have come here today to talk to us about Extension. Our reasons for inviting you here today are really two-fold:

- First, I'm the new guy on the block and I want to get to know as many of you as I can. I've been in Iowa since mid-January and I am thrilled to be here and have the privilege of working at this great university and in Extension. Iowans everywhere have made me feel very welcome. In fact, I think that some folks were worried that I would miss the mountains, so to put my mind at ease they sent me this picture and they titled it "Ski Iowa."

And here's a picture that Alan Jensen, the Extension Geospatial Technology Specialist from Creston, sent showing that on a clear day I could still see the mountains of Utah from Adair County. Iowans are a resourceful bunch, that's for sure.

- The other reason and the main reason for visiting with you today is to listen to what you have to say about Extension. I'm hoping that you will tell me about your hopes and dreams for the future and your kids' futures. I want to learn how ISU Extension can be a better partner in that future.

But first, I would like to share with you a bit about Extension, where it has been, and some ideas about where it needs to go. In other words, are we your country cousins or strategic partners?

If you were to ask me for a definition of what ISU Extension is, I would say something like Iowa State University Extension builds partnerships and provides research-based learning opportunities to improve the quality of life in Iowa. That's today's interpretation of the land grant mission that we've had since 1862. In carrying out that mission, Extension embraces the university's strategic goals of creating, sharing, and applying knowledge to make Iowa and the world a better place. We are committed to preparing students of all ages for lifelong, productive participation in society.

But what does that really mean in today's modern university in the year 2006? That's what I want to discuss with you today.

Extension can't be just the "country cousin" and at the same time remain relevant to the people of Iowa. Extension must be a strategic partner with the university and with you, the good people of Iowa. We rely upon you, our clientele, to help us carry out our mission. And we are here to disseminate the university's research and knowledge

throughout the state — from Davenport to Council Bluffs, from Decorah to Sioux City — as well as far beyond Iowa's borders. I have come to believe that a land-grant university cannot be a great university unless it is national and international in its scope and it cannot be a great university unless it also is meeting the needs of its state's citizens.

How Do We Keep Extension Relevant?

At its inception in the 19th century, Extension was not subject to the broad cultural variations and global pressures that are present in the land grant university of the 21st century. On one hand, naysayers have predicted the end of Extension and have said that the land grant mission today is irrelevant.

On the other hand, there have never been so many opportunities to serve and educate massive numbers of people, who will enter a world increasingly marked by technology, ethnic and cultural diversity, and increasingly dictated by global markets.

But Extension is damned by some extent by the lack of awareness of what it actually does.

Some of our legislators think we are only teaching folks how to can pears while globalization, hunger, and terror rage on. In essence, Extension needs to get on global radar screens and demonstrate better the relevance we bring to people's lives or face the fate of becoming an anachronism.

And ladies and gentlemen, I submit that learning, discovery, or engagement cannot take place without relevance. Old paradigms don't hold anymore. Knowledge has begun to democratize and commoditize and it's just too widely available.

I know that you are busy. You will not seek us out simply to expand your horizons; your horizons are pretty wide already. Most of you already have formulated your basic philosophy in life. Your social sensitivities have been formed. What you need is a usable body of knowledge. What you need from us is relevance.

The following are some factors I believe for remaining relevant in the 21st century and to address these great global challenges:

- Extension must have a fundamental responsibility to the people, both local and global, where research addresses actual, relevant needs;
- Extension must show tangible benefits to the people, to businesses, and to the government from blending research with learning opportunities;
- The intellectual resources of the university must be brought to bear on the great, practical challenges of this age — recognizing that the great challenges of the 21st century are not subject to resolution from a single academic discipline;
- We must face the fact that the challenges — whether of food supply and safety, disease and health, or the environment — are global, not the province of a single region, country, or continent.

- We must be nimble and responsive to make necessary changes;
- And, of utmost importance, Extension must create an on-going dialogue with you, its constituents.

Now it's time to make the transition from country cousins to Strategic Partners and ask, "What Can Extension Do for You?"

Before we can you lend a hand and provide renewed relevance we must listen to the heartbeats of you, our stakeholders, and so here we are making house-calls.

This Listening Tour is a statewide effort to gain feedback on issues of importance to Iowans. While Extension representatives are always available to the public, this presents a unique opportunity for us to hear from our constituents in a coordinated effort.

It is also an opportunity for our neighbors and friends to deliver their concerns and suggestions to us in person. We have phones and faxes and e-mail, but nothing can match the face-to-face time that the Listening Tour will allow.

Feedback is a critical part of making the right decisions on the issues that affect everyday life for our citizens, and we want to hear from as many people as possible on how we can be doing our job better.

To prepare for this, we are going to ask three fundamental sets of questions about Iowa as a state:

- What does Iowa need and expect of Extension? What factors--economic, demographic, and technological, for example--are likely to influence future needs and expectations?
- How well does the current performance of Extension meet state and public needs and expectations? Are there gaps in program offerings? In accessibility? In quality? Are realistic plans in place for filling these gaps? How well prepared is Extension to meet projected future needs?
- If there is a gap between higher Extension performance and Iowa's needs--or if it appears that projected needs cannot be met without major changes--what options do the University and Extension have to remedy the situation?

As we enter a new age of Extension relevance, our audiences, which include students and their parents, legislators, business and community leaders, and many others need to provide feedback to all of us as we set priorities and consider crucial initiatives. Our services should be efficient and accountable, and the Listening Tour provides an opportunity for citizens to let me know how we're meeting those goals.

And in the final analysis, there is what I am calling the Accountability Test that must be applied prior to all activities and in evaluating outcomes:

- Is this in our students' and clientele's best interests?
- Is this the best use of our taxpayers' money?
- Will it help us reach our goals?
- If we were starting over from scratch, what would it look like?
- Was it the right decision?
- What's working? What's not working?
- How can we do better?

Concluding Remarks

So what I have said today is not about improvement and re-tooling, it's about a new paradigm, a new vision for Extension — and we need to make absolutely sure that our vision is not a hallucination. Today, I offer you a commitment that encompasses a new vision for Extension that is responsive and relevant to today's world. A commitment, which stresses the need for a vision that is aligned with your priorities. A commitment that calls for the planning, strategies, and measurements to address the great global challenges with a structure that embraces change while recognizing the traditional value of the academic discipline.

Although the rules may be changing, the game is still the same — Extension is still all about people and improving the quality of their lives. And after all is said and done, relevance, as in beauty, is in the eye and voice of the beholder:

So tell us what's on your mind. We're all ears.