

ISU Extension and Extension Councils: Renewing the Partnership for Relevance

Welcome to Iowa State University Extension. To those of you who are continuing council members, thank you for your service to ISU Extension as elected public officials in your county. You're doing a great job. To those of you who are new to your council, thank you for signing on for this opportunity to represent the citizens in your county. And to all of you, I extend my sincere and deep appreciation, on behalf of ISU Extension, for your time, commitment, and dedication to improving the quality of life for the people of Iowa.

When you stepped up to the plate and accepted this opportunity, you aligned yourself with ISU Extension's mission: to build partnerships and provide research-based learning opportunities to improve the quality of life in Iowa.

You're participating in a federal, state, and county partnership that has stood the test of time for more than 100 years. The Smith-Lever Act made cooperative extension work "official" nationwide in 1914, but Iowa State can trace its extension work back to 1903 in Sioux County. Our land-grant roots reach back further, to 1862 and the Morrill Act. Justin Morrill's vision was to bring the power of the land-grant university to bear on whatever challenges lay before society. Still today, ISU Extension's fundamental responsibility is to the people of Iowa. We strive to demonstrate practical and tangible benefits from research, and we create opportunities where people can learn from others who are applying new innovations in the real world.

Extension must be responsive and relevant. We must align with constituent priorities. Our planning, strategies, and measurements must address today's challenges and embrace change while recognizing the traditional value of our academic disciplines. In essence, we must apply an accountability test to all activities and in evaluating outcomes:

- Is this in our 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? Or as New Mexico State University's President

Michael Martin says, "If it's not broken, make it better."

The Morrill Act may have to be worded differently today, but maybe now more than ever the public needs a reliable source of unbiased, research-based information.

Iowa State and Iowa State University Extension have countless centers and programs and departments and units, as well as area offices and 100 county offices. But we're all part of the same team. Every ISU Extension employee, whether on campus or in the field, and every extension council member must be an effective ambassador for the university and all of its programs. We're on the front line throughout the state. We have to connect Extension with Iowa State University every single day.

Our clients need to know that whenever and wherever they connect with Extension they are connecting with Iowa State University. A county extension office is part of Iowa State University. A campus extension center (be it the Beef Center, Pork Center, Value-added Agriculture, or the Community Vitality Center, among others) is Iowa State University Extension. A 4-H club meeting is Iowa State University Extension. *We* have to make the connection so that *our clients* can make the connection and *our legislators* make that connection.

We particularly need your help to make this connection for our legislators, at both the state and national levels. As citizen representatives you have enormous influence. When you talk about the benefit of ISU Extension's work, the difference Extension has made in your life—you have much more of an impact with legislators than I would have or any of our staff would have. You can make your issues heard through the Iowa Association of County Extension Councils or by contacting your state and national legislators directly.

If Iowa State and ISU Extension are to remain relevant in today's world, we must do a much better job of marketing who we are and what we do or fade away with the other great programs and brands of bygone days: WPA, 20 Mule Team Borax, and the New Deal. Let's make Iowa State and ISU Extension household words — like iPod or Homeland Security.

As we renew our partnership, let us remember that ISU Extension county offices are the front door to Iowa State University. As an extension council member, your job includes making sure that the people in your county know the door exists and that the door stays open to meet their needs. Through your ISU Extension county office, local citizens have access to educational programs for continuing and distance education, families and youth, agriculture and natural resources, business and industry, and community and economic development. Field specialists and state specialists throughout the university can assist you. Our communications and technology specialists deliver Extension information and education through webcasts, podcasts, satellite, CDs, DVDs, publications, and online materials—to the county office and directly to Iowans.

You play a key role in keeping ISU Extension relevant for the citizens of Iowa. County extension council members develop policies that allow ISU Extension county staff members to effectively conduct programming. You provide broad, reasonable guidelines for staff to be able to manage the county office in between your regular council meetings. This includes guidelines for budget and personnel and direction for programming.

Your extension council must determine the programming that meets the needs of the citizens you represent. You have the responsibility to share those needs with your county extension education director. And, you need to make sure that these needs are being addressed through your county's Extension programming.

You link programs and people. Think about it—county supervisors and other key local decision-makers need quality, non-biased input from citizens like you. They have a stake in what happens in your county. You are valuable to these stakeholders because you represent citizens and link ISU Extension programs to communities. Decision-makers depend on you to remind them how Extension's education mission differs from the missions of other government agencies. They need you to remind them why Extension is good for your county. And, they need your input on emerging issues. This responsibility brings a challenge: you must be fully informed about issues, the needs surrounding the issues, and the resources that Extension has to address them. And, an important part of your job is to anticipate what the issues are going to be in time for ISU Extension to be a player in the solution.

Extension council members help Iowa State University and ISU Extension remain relevant and engaged. You see a need or problem and ask how ISU Extension staff and specialists at Iowa State can help. Then you tell your community what help is available and where to get it.

Citizens know Iowa State University, however, market research has shown that they don't necessarily associate your county extension office with Iowa State University. That has to change. This connection between the county extension office and Iowa State is marketable. **It is critical that ISU Extension secures a market position that has new relevance to our clientele and, in turn, secures some new clientele segments who may not have thought of ISU Extension as a resource.** It's my priority to position ISU Extension as a leader in education. That's why I've appointed a marketing task force to delineate and examine our market segments, determine our market share, and look at where the opportunities lie. The end product will be a marketing and communications plan that will provide templates, budgets, and marketing guidelines for our county offices and each of our program areas.

One of the key challenges you will face as an extension council member in 2007 and the years ahead is economic development and ISU Extension's role. These days economic development has become a mantra in Iowa. Elections were fought and won based on promises of economic development, so politicians of all flavors are making it a big part of their daily sound bites. But economic development has further reaching impacts than just the statehouse. About two weeks after I became vice president for Extension and Outreach last year, President Geoffroy had his annual evaluation by the Board of Regents. The board told him that he would be evaluated on "Extension's role in economic development." That certainly brought the magnitude of economic development right into focus for me!

The truth of the matter is that Extension and economic development have been operating cheek and jowl for many years. Extension has a long history of providing access to technical expertise and helping to attract and retain businesses in a community. Moreover, Extension has continuously cut across all areas of economic development to incorporate quality of life issues including environmental and recreational amenities and social infrastructure. We don't compete with the private sector—rather, we provide the research-based education and information to lowans so they can make the best decisions for themselves and for their farms, businesses, communities, and families.

In talking with a wide range of folks, I have found that economic development means different things to different people. Some people think economic development means a new factory with hundreds of jobs. Others might think of economic development as making a tourist resort or creating wine trails. For Extension, economic development is a fundamental element of sustaining its relevance and value to its varied audiences. **What's important to lowans has been and will continue to be the focus of ISU Extension's work. In essence, relevance is the fuel that fires the engines of Extension.** (And you thought that it was bio-diesel or E-85!)

That said, Extension must maintain its relevance to all lowans in their collective and individual economic development definitions. To that end, **ISU Extension's work advances economic development in a number of ways.**

- We have business development and technical specialists working statewide and hands-on. These include specialty units like our Center for Industrial Research and Service (CIRAS) or the Value Added Ag Program. These professionals help businesses get started or maybe expand. But in all cases the goal is to help them to grow and to compete in a global market.
- Extension field specialists are out there every day educating families so they can increase their income by adding a new enterprise or improving existing ones. We help farm families evaluate investment decisions and sort through financial stress.
- We coordinate and cooperate with the myriad of support elements in the state so entrepreneurs get the right assistance in the right order. I'm talking about assistance organizations such as USDA-RD, IADG, IFBF, and local/regional economic development organizations as well. When it comes to coordination, around the United States, ISU Extension is recognized as "doing it right."

Extension doesn't seek to be all things to all people, but we are uniquely positioned to further economic development in Iowa:

- Extension is present in every county.
- We can offer prime access to research-based information not only from ISU but the whole Land Grant system.
- Few professional consulting groups can offer such a broad range of UNBIASED expertise across multiple disciplines.

As I've traveled the state, many people have told me how important Extension has been in their lives. Here are just a few of their comments.

- A woman who works with lowans living at poverty level said, "Every program we have, Extension has touched."
- In southeast Iowa, a client said, "Extension can send people to the right place for answers. The greatest thing is the unbiased information."
- In southwest Iowa, someone said, "We value the relationship with Extension because we trust the information from Extension."
- Another comment: "Please continue to 'keep an eye on the world' and help lowans to interpret what is happening daily ... Extension is a trusted institution. Please maintain the integrity and sincerity that we've all come to expect. Don't take this for granted."
- And this comment: "Stay 'in the public eye.' Get the word out about what all Iowa State Extension can do for *everyone* in the community."

When working effectively, council members are powerful. It is your responsibility to understand your role and to own it. Learn all you can about the citizens you represent, the issues relevant to those citizens, Extension's educational programs that can address those issues, and research being developed at Iowa State that is helping solve those problems.

As an extension council member, you've taken on a challenging role, but I hope you find it to be a rewarding role as well. We're here to support you as you help us remain relevant, useful, and helpful to lowans.

I am proud of you and I thank you for your dedication, your diligence, and your commitment to Iowa State, to Extension, and to the people of Iowa. Please know that you can contact me directly at any time, through e-mail, or through my blog. Good, open communication is important to me. I want to know what you think, what you feel, and what you believe. Let's hear it for Iowa State, ISU Extension, and our 100 county extension councils!