

## **Urban Extension: Oxymoron or Opportunity?**

Good morning. Before I began to organize my thoughts for this talk, I invited the ISU Extension leaders to respond to the following three questions:

1. Describe what ISU Extension is doing to address the needs of underserved urban populations and with what results.
2. Given the current resources and organization of Extension, what are the opportunities for addressing these needs in any meaningful way?
3. List the impediments (outside of funding) for reaching these populations.

After receiving their replies, it occurred to me that while they each answered the questions with great exactitude, I wasn't really asking them the right questions.

It was Peter Drucker who often postulated that leadership effectiveness is contingent upon the ability of executives to *define why the organization exists*. According to Drucker, executives must address the fundamental question: "What business are we in?" As we gather here to embark upon the activities of advancing urban extension, it seems appropriate that we are *very sure of what business we are in*.

We are all aware that the Extension Service was created to disseminate scientific information generated by Land Grant institutions to farmers and their families in order to improve agricultural production and the quality of rural life. As a result, over the years, Extension has created and maintained a favorable public image as a friend of the farmer that provided scientific information to improve rural, agriculturally-based activities.

Undeniably, the county extension agent is inextricably interwoven into the fabric of rural America. Norman Rockwell's 1948 portrait of an extension agent kneeling next to a Guernsey heifer, instructing a 4-H youth, as family members watch with curiosity and approval, captures the image most Americans have of Extension.

But serving urban populations is not new to Extension. In fact, Extension began to shift from its exclusive focus on rural farming communities in the late 1940s as a number of 4-H programs were established in urban areas in the Northeast. These and other activities were further expanded in 1953 with the amendment of the Smith-Lever Act. By the end of the 1950s, Extension's leadership made the decision to commit additional resources to 4-H urban activities. Extension's urban commitment deepened in 1968 with the establishment of the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). In the tradition of many "War on Poverty" initiatives, EFNEP was designed to help poor families in major cities such as New York and Philadelphia by providing health and nutrition information. During the same year the USDA and NASULGC Study Committee on Cooperative Extension released a report that advocated "Extension should build upon its strengths in rural areas, but also increase the commitment to the central city in the years ahead."

In recent years, however, Extension's commitment to expand the system's operations to urban areas has sparked an intense debate regarding the interpretation of Extension's mission. Critics have charged that Extension is now an institution without a clear sense of mission because of its increasing involvement in areas unrelated to agriculture. Supporters of Extension contend that the decision to broaden the interpretation of the system's mission indicates its responsiveness to changing times. Extension traditionalists complain that a broader client focus will dilute Extension's already thin resources and undermine its traditional agricultural roots.

Wayne Schutjer, former Associate Dean of Extension at Penn State, connected the dots between rural and urban clientele in his 1992 paper, "Rural, Urban Clientele Are Linked." He states, "It's not likely that Extension will survive to provide education to any client group unless the political base of Extension is broadened. Extension's capacity to meet the program needs of our traditional clientele in the long-term is ultimately linked to our ability to provide relevant public sector education for urban-metropolitan audiences."

The "business" of Extension was eloquently summarized by Ralph L. Reeder, professor emeritus of agricultural communications at Purdue University, who said, "Extension's future lies with helping those who have the greatest need. That is where the pioneers of Extension started their work ... It is an awesome assignment for an organization and its personnel if they are to find ways to 'pick up' those left behind. Yet it is no more of a challenge than the pioneers faced when Extension began. Extension's program continues to be in the hands of those people for whom Extension carries the name Service. Hope for the future remains in a basic concept of democracy, of all civilized society, that the majority of their citizens will hold firm to their 'mission of concern' for those in need."

Accepting that "helping those who have the greatest need" is the business of Extension and given that the urban poor are underserved and have a great need, it would follow that urban clientele are mission-critical to Extension. So why, after over 60 years of urbanizing Extension, are we relatively unknown to urban clientele?

Clearly, establishing the need to serve and identifying the urban needy clientele is the easiest part of our undertaking. *But reaching the urban needy with relevant information has been and continues to be a daunting task.* Marketing has surfaced as the new panacea for establishing Extension in urban populations. It is true that many people have no idea what we do. For example, a study authorized by the National 4-H Council found that urban and suburban residents ages 18 to 34 were least familiar with 4-H including men, racial and ethnic minorities, and West Coast residents. *The majority of respondents overall did not know that 4-H offers after-school programs or programs in workforce preparation; science, engineering, and technology; citizenship; and healthy living.* African Americans were most drawn to science, engineering, technology, workforce preparation, and healthy living programs, *but they were least aware that 4-H offers these programs.* Hispanics were most impressed with workforce preparation and community service programs, *but were least aware of science, engineering, and technology programs.*

Some suggest that Extension's image is badly in need of a makeover; that our Norman Rockwell image of cows and plows and the kindly agent at the ready of the farmer should have gone out with the Sears & Roebuck catalogs. Indeed, we have a similar image challenge as Sears does with its best-known product offerings having been appliances and tools for so many years. They have been advertising "the softer side of Sears" for several years now, but looking at their sales, it's obvious that no one believes them. Moreover, ladies and gentlemen, I submit that this Sears campaign is not believable because their clientele do not see prom dresses and business suits as Sears' core competencies. Similarly, although Extension has had many urban, non-agricultural programs for several years, is it possible we are somehow seen outside of our comfort zone and core competencies?

Whatever the reasons for the lack of awareness of Extension's urban programs, failing to understand why Extension has not succeeded to engage urban clientele over the years will surely portend disappointing results in our future endeavors.

Before engaging in activities or strategies for best practices, models, and opportunities for partnerships, let's pause for a moment to update our shared guiding principles to help us inform our thinking and shape our decisions particularly related to underrepresented urban clientele. In suggesting the following Guiding Principles, I have merged the findings from my staff's questionnaires with what I believe we already know in our hearts. These are designed to initiate a meaningful dialog and are by no means exhaustive:

**Principle:** Understanding the barriers that cause the low participation in our programs is the first step in removing these barriers.

Achieving an effective and inclusive community outreach program does not happen overnight.

**Principle:** It takes time, energy, and commitment to build a strong and effective outreach program. It should not be driven by outside expectations, but instead by an internal desire to see all of the people in your community served in the most effective manner.

In looking at the participants of the various meetings, it is apparent that representation from underserved groups is sorely lacking.

**Principle:** We will recruit individuals from underserved groups and involve them in the highest levels of the decision-making process as well as in the field.

It is easy to assume that an enhanced capacity within Extension to meet the educational needs of urban-metropolitan audiences creates a programmatic dilemma for Extension.

**Principle:** The core issues that we address in Extension—healthy people, healthy environments, and healthy economies—are equally important to all citizens regardless of place of residence or occupation.

**Principle:** A broader Extension audience focus is critical to maintaining the relevance of our land grant universities.

Specifically, Extension provides an important, but not exclusive, link between the citizens of the state and the research, teaching, and informal educational programs of the university. To limit Extension contact to certain geographical and occupational segments of the population denies the excluded groups access to an important mechanism for influencing the overall programmatic thrusts of their land grant university. We shouldn't exclude urban-metropolitan audiences from Extension any more than we should exclude the farm population from the undergraduate education and research conducted by the university.

Underserved persons as a whole share a common experience and common goals: to be independent, productive, and included in all aspects of life.

**Principle:** Each underserved group has its own unique characteristics and will receive a unique, creative, and innovative, service delivery strategy.

So, with these principles to guide us, let's focus on activities and strategies to serve the Urban Disadvantaged. As I mentioned earlier, the public's perception of our core competencies has long been that of an agricultural service organization.

Why then, after over 60 years of providing 4-H to urban youth, does 4-H still struggle with a "state fair" moniker? It is both unacceptable and quixotic to chalk it up to bad marketing and go on with business as usual. As we address the future of urban Extension or even Extension at large, it is key for us to review and update our core competencies and to refine our organizational structure. We must dig deeper for the answers and perhaps look within the skills, attitudes, and priorities of our personnel. In his dissertation, "Exploration of Future Practices for Urban Extension County Offices: Identifying Patterns of Success Using a Modified Delphi and Case Study," Jack Kerrigan, of Ohio State University, poses some good questions:

"How will Extension balance requests for programs for various audiences? How should urban Extension's resources be focused for maximum impact? Who should Extension involve in the decision-making process on these issues? What additional funding sources should be cultivated and how will the change in funding patterns affect programming, target audiences, staffing patterns, and all of the other factors involved in this change? With these issues in mind, it is critical that patterns of success be identified so urban Extension professionals may set meaningful goals and against which to measure their achievements."

Kerrigan's study revealed a number of emerging issues, the most notable being, "Urban is different. ...[that] There was a sense of isolation from other urban professionals as well as a bond to them. [that] There appears to be tacit 'urban' assumptions and knowledge and a sense that new challenges, such as drug problems, gangs, and dysfunctional family issues tend to come to urban areas before they spread out to rural areas."

He concluded that, "This issue of urban-is-different needs further study." I couldn't agree more.

Kerrigan's recommendations cut to the core of the matter: "The skill set needed for urban Extension educators includes group facilitation, leadership development, human relations, grantsmanship, coalition building, mass media, marketing, and a basic understanding of community development concepts and practices. *These skills are as important in urban Extension as expertise in a pertinent field.* Urban staff members should welcome and value diversity and be comfortable with the wide range of urban settings. *Urban Extension staffing should reflect the diversity of the community served. This may mean hiring candidates who are from or have experience working in the urban community.* Because of the sense of urban-is-different and the possibility of an urban personality, it makes sense that search committees for urban professionals be composed of urban Extension professionals who may be better able to identify the characteristics needed for success in urban Extension."

The take-home message is clear: Our prime strategy is to ensure that we have not only the core *competencies* but also the core *characteristics* that will make the difference in a successful urban Extension professional and a strong urban Extension program.

What are some of the strategies to help *those who have the greatest need* in urban America? I'll share with you what the ISU Extension leaders listed as their top opportunities:

- Develop partnerships with state commissions and existing organizations already serving underrepresented groups
- Increase representation on committees that support immigration, people of color, and lifting people out of poverty.
- Increase diversity training for professionals.
- Expand multicultural curricula.
- Establish outreach centers for urban design.
- Hire staff who represent the population being served in terms of social class, as well as racial and minority diversity.
- Increase cultural competencies among existing staff.
- Find ways to bridge language barriers.
- Improve access to Extension services and location of programming.
- Match needs and interests of citizens with agency and funding source requirements.
- Gain the trust of the powerful voices in the community who may block access of information.
- Build strong Extension urban networks within urban communities and among national urban constituencies, in order to affect urban agendas, share urban programming successes, and develop urban partnerships.

Many of the specific recommendations will require training and, more importantly, skill development for Extension personnel.

So is Urban Extension an oxymoron or is it an opportunity to serve? I like to think of it this way: the frontier has simply expanded — from the rural outpost to the urban front line. We are staking our claim in new territory, which is going to require some new thinking and some new faces. Extension has a glorious history that bespeaks of almost a century of success, and the land grant system is approaching its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. But let us define the future of extension and the land grants by only the usable part of the past. Let us find new avenues of relevance through our intrinsic sense of responsiveness and entrepreneurialism, and build upon our foundation of outreach know-how.

And let us remember that Justin Morrill's vision for the land grant university was to bring the power of the university to bear on whatever challenges lay before society in that day. Today we simply face a different set of challenges. So I will leave you with one more question: What would happen if we were to propose the Morrill Act, the Hatch Act, and the Smith-Lever Act to today's Congress. Would they have a prayer of passing?

In looking for the answer, let's ask ourselves, WWJMD? ("What would Justin Morrill do?")

Thank you for your time.