

2010

executive summary

ISU Extension Qualitative Needs Assessment

Extension is broadly perceived as serving youth and agricultural interests in the state. Yet once past this more general image, it's truly what people know and how they know Extension that tends to dictate perception.

During summer 2010, Iowa State University Extension conducted a series of studies to determine who the organization's clients are, who they should be, who they "could" be, and what type of programming Extension should be providing, as well as what roles Extension should play. The report reflects the findings from 18 focus groups. Ten of the groups provided a geographic representation. Eight groups had selected participants with specific interest and expertise in natural resources and sustainability, building human capital, economic growth and standard of living, and food systems and nutrition.

Extension is broadly perceived as serving youth and agricultural interests in the state. Yet once past this more general image, it's truly what people know and how they know Extension that tends to dictate perception. Their awareness of Extension also is dictated by how individuals come in contact with the organization. As one participant noted, "Extension serves a wide variety of people." Those having contact with nutrition programs, or financial literacy, or community development have different perceptions of what Extension is and what it means to the state. This is not surprising; rather, it indicates the variety of clientele served by the breadth of Extension's programming. While the broad perception remains youth and agriculture, the emerging reality appears linked to very individualized experience or contact or a personal relationship with an Extension practitioner.

4-H and youth development is seen as a legacy feature and a perceived broadening need that ISU Extension should address. Participants said Extension has done so much, in the past and present, but so much more needs to be done with Iowa's youth. In both the regional and thematic focus groups, a strong association was made between Extension's youth programming and the future of Iowa. Extension was encouraged to go beyond its traditional youth programs to engage increasing numbers of young people in an

increasing variety of ways. This finding suggests a youth focus may help to drive Extension growth in two ways. First, youth are the future and organizational loyalty gained early tends to stick. Second, the public support for youth education, leadership opportunities, and activities appears to be positively associated with Extension and potentially associated with public resource support.

In aggregate, focus group participants indicated that Extension serves two distinct and different roles: Extension acts as a facilitator and convener, and also provides information, education, and research to help Iowans better understand, adapt, and respond to key issues. Consistent with these roles is that ISU Extension is perceived as a neutral party, and an organization that can be trusted. When Extension is present in discussions, etc., there is a perception of professionalism and trust. The trust is based upon a tradition and expectation that the university information and education is balanced. Thus, as a convener/facilitator, Extension can take on a role to help individuals, organizations, or communities to work together. This same neutrality also is a hallmark of Extension's role as a source of information and education.

More diverse opinions were expressed regarding how Extension should continue to deliver upon its educational mission. Again, it appeared that some of this diversity of opinion was based upon the educational role Extension was seen as taking in a respondent's community. A respondent who sees Extension as a provider of research-based information is more apt to see potential uses of information technologies, than is a person who sees Extension as a facilitator or coordinator. This finding suggests openings for Extension to affect both demand and perception with strategic focus on tangible activities or technically delivered options.

Key themes emerged but need more development. Two of these include support for economic development at an individual and community level, as well as healthy living aspects viewed fairly comprehensively. Extension is viewed as objective and competent as an educator for small business. Again, the Extension convener role applies in bringing parties together at a broader community level. The themes of economic development and healthy lifestyles appear current and durable. Both themes made sense to focus group participants within Extension roles of convener/facilitator or educator. Another aspect that should be more fully explored is how Extension should interact with youth audiences. Should the interaction be through its traditional role with 4-H clubs, or are there other venues that would be more effective?

When it comes to how Iowa State University Extension provides services, focus group respondents want a

traditional Extension system that can call a meeting to educate or coordinate local activities, but also agile enough to use the latest information technology to get current research-based information to the people who need it.

However, focus group participants indicated that Extension was not very effective at serving new citizens in Iowa and was not reaching out effectively to underserved populations. A quantitative study in 2010 determined Extension has a customer base that is rural, white, aging, and interested in agriculture. Demographics indicate the growth in Iowa will occur with more people of color, and those who live in urban or suburban areas with needs and interests focusing on issues other than agriculture. This naturally begs the question that focus group participants asked: Will the Extension organization be viable if it doesn't appropriately change the mix of who it does business with, how and where it conducts its work, and what it provides for programs and education?

These findings indicate a perception that if Extension is to remain a viable organization, it will need to grow by reaching new clients. Although it has a respectable reputation among its clientele base now, Extension will need to continually be attuned to its marketplace to determine how to meet the needs of its customers. The study did not examine a question of how the current client base would perceive Extension if activities and resources were re-focused toward new clients in non-traditional spaces of the Extension service market.

While it cannot be all things to all people, ISU Extension will need to continue to identify the needs of existing and new clientele and continuously adapt its systems to address those needs. In lieu of a monolithic approach, the focus groups seemed to suggest that ISU Extension should be agile in identifying educational opportunities for all Iowans, and provide for a variety of modes to reach multiple types of clientele. Such a finding leads to a need for less linear developmental processes for Extension programming and more agile methods for responding in real time. The point where programming innovation must occur appears decentralized in the current and future environments. Field personnel in particular must be tuned, trained, and mandated to understand the opportunities and needs in their location.

A downloadable/printable copy of the full report, which includes this summary, is available at www.extension.iastate.edu/aboutus.html

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