# *Specialization and Change in Extension*

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*"In projecting into the 1970's, it is apparent," according to the Joint USDA/NASULGC Extension Study Committee,* "that one of the major organizational issues will be staffing at the local level. Patterns of staffing on other than a county basis will need to be seriously considered. With more knowledge calling for greater specialization, area programming may become a more practical approach than county programming. Local offices should be structured on a multi-county basis whenever such an arrangement offers a more efficient means of carrying out programs." The committee recommends that more specialized area agents be employed. Implementing their recommendation (as indeed is being done) could conceivably have long-range implications for the organization and the staff. Some of the possible implications are dealt with in the analysis developed in the article that follows.—The editor.*

THIS PAPER PRESENTS a sociological analysis of some of the organizational implications of increasing occupational specialization in Cooperative Extension Services.

Increasing specialization is one of the major trends in the American occupational structure.[1] In Extension Services, this trend is supported by the needs of commercial farmers and other clients for information that can be provided most effectively by subject-matter specialists—and sometimes only by them. To meet the burgeoning demand, additional specialized roles have appeared and others may be anticipated. New positions are being established to provide organizational support and legitimacy for the new roles.

An additional complication is attributable to the fact that Extension's primary original mission of increasing agricultural production

* *A People and a Spirit,* A Report of the Joint USDA/NASULGC Extension Study Committee (Fort Collins, Colorado: Printing and Publications Service, Colorado State University, November, 1968), p. 73.

[1] See Walter L. Slocum, *Occupational Careers* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1966), especially chapters 3 and 7.

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has been successfully accomplished and the number of farmer-clients has declined. These developments have created a need for re-evaluating Extension's missions and clientele—a need which has been recognized in most states, although there does not seem to be a consensus as to the best course to follow. Some state Extension Services, such as that of Missouri, have redefined their mission to include the provision of off-campus continuation education to qualified and interested persons in a wide variety of subject-matter areas. Others have made a heavy investment in community resource development. It appears that some may be marking time.

Providing an adequate program of high level continuation education in states that accept this mission will, of course, require more subject-matter specialists. However, more specialists will be required even in those states (if any) in which Extension Services decide to restrict their educational work to commercial farmers and homemakers.

## Changing Organizational Formats

In some states, the demand for highly sophisticated technical information by commercial farm operators has already resulted in the creation of the position of area subject-matter specialists,[2] about which I will have more to say later.

The basic reason for the emerging shift away from the old system of general agricultural agent at the county level, "back-stopped" by a few state specialists, is the growing demand for specialized information. In the Pacific states, for example, there may be a number of different specialized types of farming in a single county (e.g., Yakima County, Washington, produces apples, grapes, pears, peaches, apricots, hops, mint, vegetables, dairy products, beef, poultry, and other commodities). Successful operators of commercial farms need specialized information pertaining specifically to their particular types of enterprises. To get it, some were bypassing local agricultural agents (who frequently knew less than they did about their specialized problems) and going directly to the research worker—the scientist who was pushing back the frontiers of knowledge.

Agricultural agents in the state of Washington, and probably in most other states, have nearly always worked with the more prosperous, better educated farmers. They are the ones who have sought information and used it when they got it. Not many of the poor have used Extension as a source of information about farming or

[2] See Frank S. Zettle, "The Area Specialist Position," *Journal of Cooperative Extension,* II (Winter, 1964), 201-208.

homemaking.[3] Consequently, it made a deep impression on Extension policy makers when leading farmers began to say that Extension agents could not meet their needs. A few years ago, a prominent farmer in one Washington county said to a district supervisor that "Extension is best suited for backward countries like Africa." Recognition of the existence of such attitudes led to efforts to re-establish contact with commercial farmers. In Washington, and in at least some other states, this resulted in the appointment of area subject-matter specialists, such as dairy and poultry. In addition, there has been increased emphasis on conferences, workshops, and short courses which provide formal instruction of a technical nature.

Typically, an agricultural area subject-matter specialist is expected to keep abreast of all important developments in his subject and to transmit this knowledge to interested farm operators who live in an area which is larger than a single county. This is, of course, an attempt to meet some of the problems of a changing clientele by changing the organizational format.

This solution probably should be regarded as transitional and temporary. It does not appear to be a viable long-range solution because it may hinder rather than facilitate certain crucial aspects of the relationship of the specialist to two important reference groups —his community and his work organization. Some further comments may help to make these problems clear.

### *Staff Orientations*

Prior to the 1960's community relationships were probably of paramount importance to most county agents. The county subsystem of relationships in which they performed their roles was not really simple, but in comparison to the present situation it seems relatively simple and uncomplicated. The main Extension positions at the county level were agricultural agent and home agent; sometimes there was also a youth agent.

In comparison to their clientele—farmers and rural homemakers —the earlier county agents were experts. Furthermore, most of the information they sought to teach was highly relevant to their clients. Relationships were direct and personal in nature. The county agent knew his clients and in turn was known as a whole person. Traditional county agents did not have identity problems. They knew who they were. They tended to identify with local social systems

[3] See Walter L. Slocum, *Extension Contacts, Selected Characteristics, Practices, and Attitudes of Washington Farm Families,* Agricultural Experiment Stations Bulletin No. 584 (Pullman: State College of Washington [now Washington State University], April, 1958).

first,[4] second with the university as an organization, third with the Federal Extension Service, and possibly to some extent with their major subject-matter department.

As we examine the position of area specialist from an interactional perspective, it is apparent that the possibilities for a specialist to establish and maintain intimate personal relationships as a member of a local community or even of a county are largely absent. If the area specialist devotes a major portion of his time to developing personal contacts with prospective clients, he is likely to fall behind in knowledge of his subject. If this happens he will be unable to provide sophisticated up-to-date information, and thus lose his competence as a specialist. Even if he does keep current, relatively few persons in any specific locality will be able to make use of his specialized knowledge. This will be noticed by local leaders as well as by the area specialist—and in some cases continuation of local financial support may be jeopardized unless effective contact is maintained with local power structures by resident agents or other representatives of Extension.[5]

Since the area specialist is no longer primarily identified with the social systems that exist in a specific county, he must look to the university rather than to a county for promotion and other forms of recognition, as well as for information. Within the university, he must look primarily to his subject-matter department for recognition and rewards. To gain and maintain acceptance by his department he will have to develop an *occupational* identity as a professional agronomist, entomologist, economist, sociologist, or whatever his special field is.

To provide career incentives for subject-matter specialists, appropriate departmental career lines will be required. (A career line consists of a series of steps or grades within an occupation and/or organization which provide opportunity for upward career progress.[6]) The career line of professor is a model that is relevant for the occupational careers of subject-matter specialists in Extension. In some states, the title *professor* is reserved for members of the resident instruction staff. Extension employees may have equivalent ranks, but not the title. This tends to be a sore point with sub-

[4] However, it has been noted that county committee members emphasize local orientation even more than county agents do. See E. A. Wilkening, "Consensus in Role Definition of County Extension Agents and Local Sponsoring Committee Members," *Rural Sociology*, XXIII (June, 1958), 184-97.

[5] A case of this kind was brought to my attention by an area livestock specialist in Missouri in May, 1968.

[6] Slocum, *Occupational Careers, op. cit.*, pp. 4-7.

ject-matter specialists, many of whom covet the title of professor.[7]

Aside from the specialists' career lines, the major channel for upward mobility in Extension at present is the administrative career line (the titles frequently used are county chairman, area supervisor, assistant director, director). In general, the pay, the power, and the prerequisites increase as one rises to higher levels.

In contrast to these relatively tall career lines, the career line for most traditional county agricultural agents was short. It "peaked" with the position of county chairman, although a few were able to climb the administrative career ladder and become directors, deans, or even university presidents.

## Role Expectations/Rules/Norms

Many of the activities of Extension, as we have known them, may be compared to the activities of a ball team in the sense that people who occupy various specialized positions have to cooperate with people in other positions in order to attain desired goals. Every county Extension worker, like every member of a ball team, knew intimately the roles of every other worker in his county. Devoted baseball fans know what every first basemen is expected to do, what constitutes outstanding performance by a pitcher, and what a home run means; they criticize or applaud the performance of specific roles. Extension's old-time clientele at the county level had specific role expectations too.[8]

In Extension, as in sports teams, there are a great many unwritten rules which define permissible conduct. These, too, are familiar to participants and fans/clients. For example, in baseball no fighting or name-calling is allowed. The rules of football or hockey are not applicable to a baseball game. And the traditional rules of Extension differ in important respects from those of the resident instruction staff.

### *Influence of Background and Training*

In Extension Services some traditions and unwritten rules probably have been more important than the written regulations in accounting for high *esprit de corps* and effective teamwork relationships. Two that have been of crucial importance are (1) recruitment of persons with similar backgrounds and (2) preference in ap-

[7] Unpublished data, Department of Rural Sociology, Washington State University, 1962.

[8] Wilkening, *op. cit.*

pointment to high administrative positions for men and women who entered at the county level. In the past, a state Extension Service was, to a marked degree, a closed social system which could be entered only at the bottom and then only by persons with the proper credentials.

In the past, most new home agents have had degrees in home economics and nearly all new agricultural agents have been educated in a college of agriculture. Many, perhaps most, agents came initially from farms; if not, they tended to have a strong interest in farming and rural life. Youth agents typically have come from the same sources. It also appears to have been true that a person was seldom, if ever, appointed to high administrative or policy-making positions without having had "validating" experience in a county.

One result of this "inbreeding" has been to limit the input and adoption of ideas and practices not fully consistent with the prevailing norms of the system. We may speculate that nonconformists have generally left the system soon after entry. Another result has been to foster the development of what sociologists call "we-feeling" and symbiotic cooperation among members to achieve system goals.

In some states, these unwritten norms are being changed drastically. In Missouri, for example, the present state Extension director did not come up through the system; he has a doctorate in guidance and counseling rather than in an agricultural subject. County level workers with unorthodox backgrounds are being hired—a woman county agent has nearly finished her work for a doctorate in guidance and counseling. In another county, a youth worker's college training was in human relations; he worked as a Scout executive for several years prior to joining the Extension Service. An Extension sociologist teaches courses in group dynamics to business executives in localities long distances from the main campus of the university. Some county agents with traditional backgrounds feel threatened by the uncertainties of the future while some of those with unorthodox backgrounds wonder if they will ever be able to gain acceptance as "insiders."[9]

It seems obvious that changes (such as the recruitment of personnel with nontraditional backgrounds and the provision of specialized continuation education for staff in fields not typical in the formal training of the bulk of present Extension personnel) will materially alter the nature of Extension Services as social systems. It is even possible that some county Extension offices may be superseded by community colleges. (In the state of Washington, for example, there are 22 community colleges and 39 counties.)

[9] Personal observation, Spring Semester, 1968.

## Conclusion

Although there appears to be considerable potential for greatly expanded programs of off-campus continuation education, the transformation to an organization of specialists is not likely to be made without loss of valued traditional roles. One result already mentioned briefly is likely to be the loss of traditional Extension roles in local communities. The community involvement of a specialist will probably tend to resemble those of other faculty members, being restricted primarily to off-duty activities in the community in which he resides.

Substantial problems are also likely to be encountered in forging new relationships with subject-matter departments. Some departments may not greet the Extension specialist with open arms. A study made in Washington a few years ago revealed that most professors rated research and resident teaching much higher than Extension.[10] In my view, this is partly due to the organization separation of Extension specialists from their subject-matter departments. Some universities have attempted to remedy this by making department chairmen members of Extension. This has helped some but the long-term solution probably requires a more drastic move. As implied earlier, it is my opinion that the position of Extension specialist (instructor to professor) will have to be recognized as a respectable career line in subject-matter departments. Specialists will have to be permitted, if not encouraged to become full members of their departmental intellectual communities. This means that they will have to comply with the norms of their professional peers if they are to progress up the professional career ladder.

It may be possible—although I am inclined to believe it will be increasingly difficult because of departmental career considerations —to continue to maintain the team relationships that have characterized Extension Services. In any case, we cannot expect restoration of the relatively simple, intimate situation that we imagine was characteristic in the past. If Extension Services are to survive as components of universities, they will have to make major changes in objectives, procedures, and organizational structure. In my opinion, application of sociological knowledge would be useful in making some of these changes less painful.

[10] Unpublished data from a questionnaire sent by the Rural Sociology Department of Washington State University to approximately 50 per cent of its faculty in 1962.