

# identifying high extension communicators

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What responsibility do social scientists have to make knowledge available to non-academic users? How involved are they in communicating to Extension audiences? How are high communicators different from the low ones? These are questions addressed in this study of social scientists at the University of Missouri-Columbia, where since 1962 the opportunity to become involved in Extension work has been expanded to all departments and divisions.

Some of the faculty continue to expand basic science knowledge, some do applied research, and some work at abstracting, validating, and disseminating information that's useful to non-academic users. They may choose to communicate mainly to other scientists (academia) or to the public. The last (Extension communication) is the primary concern of this article.

## The Study

The major problems were to:

1. Identify the high Extension communicators.
2. Compare them with low communicators on characteristics known to explain differences in their communication output.

## Faculty Interviewed

The intent was to interview all of the regularly appointed social scientists in the university. During the 1972-73 school year, over 90% were interviewed. University divisions included the Colleges of Arts and Science, Agriculture, Home Economics, and the Departments of Agricultural Economics, Economics, Political Science, Regional and Community Affairs, General and Rural Sociology, Psychology, and Anthropology.

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*Communicative  
Output*

To accurately measure communicative output, this study has to take into account all of the communicative devices or activities used by the faculty to communicate with other faculty, professionals, and the public. These varied with each faculty member and his target audiences.

We chose a measure based on estimated time spent in preparing for and completing communicative activities. A judgmental time standard for each activity, supplied by peers on the Columbia campus, was applied to the communicative activities reported by each faculty member. The score for an individual was the total of the man-day estimates applied to the communicative activities reported in each case. All estimates were in terms of an 8-hour day, 40-hour week—probably far below that actually spent by many faculty members. This resulted in individual scores indicative of output and a measure appropriate for comparative purposes. But this isn't indicative of the total man-day effort expended to produce the output.<sup>1</sup>

*Explanatory  
Variables*

The study tried to identify the variables involved in faculty communication output to academic and Extension audiences. These included:

1. Background (socioeconomic characteristics primarily).
2. Prior socialization, mostly the graduate college experience.
3. Conditions of appointment.
4. Perceptual variables—for example, what a faculty member thought a public university should be and do.
5. Perceived reference group influence on own work.
6. Relative reward derived from satisfaction with own work versus prospects for professional advancement.

These 6 categories included 62 variables initially thought to have some bearing on Extension communication.<sup>2</sup> From these 62 variables, 18 were included in the profile because analysis showed them to be more influential than others in each of the categories.

**Profile of High  
Communicator**

There were great communicative output differences among departments and individuals. Agricultural Economics was the highest department with a 222 average man-day score; Psychology, the lowest with an average score of 0. The overall range for faculty members was from 0 for 23 of the faculty to a high of 1,826 for 1, with an overall average of 235 man-days. Almost half of the total output was produced by 10.4% of the 125 faculty. Three-fourths was produced by only 24%.

The 30 individuals who produced the 75% plus were designated as high Extension communicators. The other 95 were labeled as low communicators.

*Background* Background had much to do with becoming an Extension communicator. Table 1 shows that high Extension communicators in the social sciences came mainly from rural backgrounds and farms. More high than low Extension communicators were 40 years or older.

**Table 1. Profile of Extension communicators.**

Characteristics	High Extension communicators		Low Extension communicators	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	30	100%	95	100%
<i>Background</i>				
Over 40 years of age	24	80.0	48	50.5
Longest residence during childhood was in rural area	20	66.7	41	43.2
Father was a farmer	17	56.7	27	28.4
Lived longest in midwest or west during childhood	20	66.7	67	70.5
<i>Prior socialization</i>				
Had doctorate (total)	17	56.7	52	87.4
Had doctorate from a land-grant university	10	33.3	42	44.2
Did church work as a graduate student	16	53.3	21	22.1
Employment previous to faculty position:				
Academic	7	23.4	26	27.3
Non-academic	18	60.0	43	45.3
<i>Conditions of appointment</i>				
Full professor	19	63.3	33	34.7
Had a 12-month appointment	26	86.7	51	53.7
Appointment provided for:				
Doing research	13	43.3	42	44.2
Teaching	15	50.0	77	81.1
Extension work	18	60.0	17	17.9

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**Table 1 (continued)**

Characteristics	High Extension communicators		Low Extension communicators	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	30	100%	95	100%
Receipt of research funds	10	33.3	47	49.5
University salary was over \$15,000	26	86.7	62	65.4
Had other professional income over \$500	7	30.0	23	24.2
<i>Perceptual</i>				
What respondent thought he should emphasize most as a faculty member:				
Outreach work	17	56.7	14	14.7
Basic research and/or teaching	12	40.0	75	79.0
Perceived self as being engaged in Extension work	23	76.7	21	22.1
<i>Reference group influence</i>				
Reported strong influence from:				
Academia	6	20.0	39	41.1
Outside academia	24	80.0	56	58.9

*Prior Socialization* Holding a doctorate degree wasn't necessarily conducive to high Extension communication. In fact, more low than high producers held doctorates. A doctorate from a land-grant university, where the tradition of service to society is thought to be strongest, didn't make a real difference. Nevertheless, when only doctorate degree holders were compared, a slightly higher percentage of high than low producers got their advanced degrees from a land-grant university.

Of all extra curricular activities in which graduate students commonly participated, involvement in church work made more difference than any other. Also, more high than low communicators had prior non-academic employment.

*Conditions of Appointment* An Extension appointment quite understandably headed the list as an explainer of Extension communication. High

Extension communicators were more likely to be full professors, have 12-month appointments, and have a high salary enhanced by outside income than the low communicators. High producers usually didn't have teaching or research appointments or receive research funds.

*Perceptual* About 77% of the high producers considered themselves involved in Extension work compared to 22.1% of the low producers. More of the top producers than the low placed first or second emphasis on outreach activities as an appropriate university function.<sup>3</sup> Basic research and/or teaching was less important.

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**Faculty who choose to produce for Extension clientele must be rewarded. Otherwise, production for Extension audiences will continue to come either from older, academically secure faculty or from those who feel they can defy the system.**

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*Reference Group Influence* High Extension communicators were more likely to have influences from reference groups outside of academia—including professionals, funding agencies, and the public. Low communicators reported strong influence from academia.

**Implications** This study indicated that the influences of academia on a young faculty member restricted high Extension communication. However, a young faculty member trying to gain promotion and tenure surely must make concessions to academia. Older faculty who've achieved tenure and high status may feel freer to communicate with Extension audiences.

If increased involvement by the social science faculty in Extension work is desired, two strategies are indicated. Recruiting graduate students with rural backgrounds and an interest in social services seems best. They tend to become the highest producers of Extension communication. Additionally, they should have non-academic work experiences that have made them aware of the "outside" world and its social science informational needs.

In the short-run, what's needed is the involvement of the middle-aged or older faculty, who are willing to become involved in Extension activities. This involvement could be encouraged by establishing relationships with prospective clients outside of academia who can use their services and provide appreciation and public support when it's needed.

This is a two-way street and the Extension field staff can also take some initiative. An effort to involve willing social scientists in personally rewarding field activities might be the catalyst. Indications are that when relationships of this type are established, they usually continue even without official pressure.

Clearly a change in the university rewards system is necessary if social scientists can be expected to concentrate on producing relevant programs for Extension. These activities must be recognized as a legitimate faculty function and rewarded on a par with academic performance and publication in the respected academic journals.

Faculty who choose to produce for Extension clientele must be rewarded. Otherwise, production for Extension audiences will continue to come either from older, academically secure faculty or from those who feel they can defy the system. The latter are likely to be few in number and the wait for good programs from the first is likely to be too long.

### Footnotes

1. Faculty typically communicate the results of the same research through a variety of channels and Extension activities once perfected—for example, a short course or a leadership training session may be used many times during a given year or perhaps repeatedly over several. This often results in scores far in excess of the man-days in a year.
2. Herbert F. Lionberger and B. Anji Reddy, "An Inductive Approach to the Explanation of Extension Communication Output of the Social Science Faculty in a Midwestern University" (Paper read at the annual meeting of the Rural Sociological Society, New York, New York, August, 1976) and Herbert F. Lionberger and B. Anji Reddy, "Reference Group Influence on Extension Communication of a Social Science Faculty," *Rural Sociology*, XLI (Spring, 1976), 25-44.
3. Outreach activities included: doing applied research for knowledge use outside of own academic field, preparing publications for clientele outside of own discipline, testing new ideas and innovations for local adaptability, consulting with and preparing educational materials for agencies concerned with services to people, and working with off-campus people to improve their living conditions.