



**August 2010**  
**Volume 48 Number 4**  
**Article Number 4FEA2**

[Return to Current Issue](#)

# **Building Teamwork into an Integrated Extension Program: Faculty Perspectives on Area of Expertise Teams**

**Vera Bitsch**

Associate Professor  
[bitsch@msu.edu](mailto:bitsch@msu.edu)

**Suzanne Thornsbery**

Associate Professor  
[thornsbu@msu.edu](mailto:thornsbu@msu.edu)

Department of Agricultural, Food, and Resource Economics  
Michigan State University  
East Lansing, Michigan

---

**Abstract:** In today's Extension environment of budget cuts and restructuring, the emphasis on building team programs has become greater than ever. We review the Area of Expertise team structure approach that was initiated at Michigan State University for Extension programming in 1994. Goals were to strengthen integration between campus and field staff, between research and Extension, and between disciplines. We provide an update on team-building within this structure and describe two faculty approaches to joining these, now ongoing, teams. Common experiences and lessons learned are highlighted to guide others in the process of joining diverse team environments in an effective way.

---

## **Introduction**

The economic crisis has brought unprecedented funding pressures to bear on state Extension systems across the U.S. As administrators and educators search for ways to deliver effective programming with drastically reduced resources, the concept of team-building as an efficient way to meet stakeholder needs takes on new importance (Torppa & Smith, 2009). Yet the incorporation of individual programming into a team-based system requires significant trade-offs between integration and logistics at an individual level. This article provides an update on team-building within the Area of Expertise (AoE) structure after it was initiated at Michigan State University (MSU) in 1994. The focus is to highlight some of the relevant trade-offs as experienced through alternative approaches to integrating individual faculty Extension programs with statewide teams.

Despite a tremendous amount of research devoted to teams, the antecedents of effective teams and the complex interactions among team members, their skill sets and characteristics, team context, and organizational variables over time are still not well understood (Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp, & Gilson, 2008). The perspectives provided here are two different strategies taken by campus faculty striving to integrate their

cross-mission programs into these, now ongoing, teams. One faculty viewpoint reflects on a cross-cutting issue that touches on many team missions. The other faculty viewpoint focuses on an issue of relevance to a more limited number of teams. Common experiences and lessons learned are highlighted to guide others in the process of joining diverse team environments in an effective manner.

The concept of building teams for Extension programming is not new (e.g., Patton, 1987), but often difficult to implement (Kelbaugh & Earnest, 2008). This was highlighted in a report of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land Grant Universities analyzing challenges to the land-grant system to stay relevant into the 21st century:

One challenge we face is growing public frustration with what is seen to be our unresponsiveness... [A] part of the issue is that although society has problems, our institutions have 'disciplines.' In the end, what these complaints add up to is a perception that, despite the resources and expertise available on our campuses, our institutions are not well organized to bring them to bear on local problems in a coherent way" (2001, p. 13).

Creation of cross-disciplinary (or transdisciplinary) teams is a one way to try and address this problem of organization. Transdisciplinary represents the overall co-ordination of science, education, and innovation towards a specific societal purpose. In transdisciplinary teams, researchers (and often stakeholders) from diverse sectors interact and exchange information to co-produce knowledge (Pohl, 2008).

In addition to coordination among disciplines, the need for campus faculty, and increasingly field staff, to integrate their Extension activities with an active research program is often noted. An analysis by the Committee on the Future of the Colleges of Agriculture in the Land Grant University System of the National Research Council (1996) pointed to the need for cross-disciplinary team-building and two additional challenges, to integrate across missions and to collaborate across institutions and states. In a globalized economy, integration and collaboration across countries and continents is also critical for effective programming (Patton, 1987).

A reason for highlighting these challenges is that the integration effort has not (yet) succeeded to the extent called for by the pressing needs of society, although state directors generally perceive team program leadership as efficient and providing overall positive results (Taylor, 2004). Differences in reward systems contribute to friction between field and campus (McGrath, Conway, & Johnson, 2007; Ukaga et al., 2002). Balancing these differences with common objectives is a necessity for efficient team performance; however, team outcomes are typically evaluated differently by field and campus faculty (e.g., Seidl, 2003).

## **Team Building through Area of Expertise Teams**

At MSU, an early attempt to strengthen integration and create a better interface between campus and field, between research and Extension, and also between disciplines resulted in the creation of self-directed teams as the main educational development and delivery model (Leholm, Hamm, Suvedi, Gray, & Poston, 1999). An important objective was better integration of campus-based faculty into field programming, with teams built around program areas (Bethel, Kells, Chatfield, Leholm, & Vlasin, 2006). The initial three teams (field crops, livestock, and dairy) had grown to around 30 teams by 2009. Although a commodity focus still remains dominant for most teams, there are some with a different focus, such as community development, family resource management, farm management, and youth development.

Area of Expertise (AoE) teams were initially organized around seven guiding principles. (1) Teams have co-chairs; one from campus and another from off-campus. (2) They develop their own micro-vision, and operating procedures. (3) They have an interdisciplinary, problem-solving, customer-orientated focus. (4)

They develop a plan for program delivery and curricula for staff development. (5) Involvement of stakeholders is expected, including stakeholder information input for program/project selection, direction, and evaluation. (6) Each AoE educator has an opportunity to select a mentor. (7) Teams are expected to be entrepreneurial and generate resources for enhanced programming.

Since those founding years, other land-grant universities have experimented with different kinds of formal and permanent team approaches to the delivery of Extension services. While some states do have combined research and Extension teams, other prominent Extension programs with formal structures similar to the AoE setup include University of Wisconsin <<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/ag/teams/>> and the Ohio State University (Chatfield et al., 2004; Mullen, Thomison, Lentz, LaBarge, & Watters, 2007). Although an applied research component is often present in these teams' guidelines (Koenig et al., 2004; Seidl, 2003), the focus of team activities and impacts seems to be Extension programming.

The AoE concept at MSU has further evolved over the past 12 years. In general, the seven guiding principles still, hold but logistics of application have changed somewhat. Not surprisingly, in times of shrinking resources and increased demands for accountability, many of the changes focus on documentation of efforts (Aguilar & Thornsbury, 2005). There is more emphasis on goal setting and reporting of team activities (versus compilation of individual activities), including outcomes, impacts, and documenting clientele's behavioral changes.

This increase in accountability can be viewed from different perspectives; the autonomy of teams decreases as oversight increases. In order to address evolving societal needs, it is important that teams maintain a strategic focus to remain proactive and not become overly focused on measuring outcomes (Patton, 1987). At the same time, increased oversight can result in increased incentives for change and evolution of teams and their activities. For example, the system is now structured to include competitive grants for new team initiatives and awards for innovative programs. There are also budgetary incentives for reporting activities and evaluation efforts.

The evolved AoE structure includes a more formalized review of program areas. Teams have been decommissioned when they cease to function or operate without field participation. Involvement of field staff is seen as a necessary component of building an Extension program (in contrast to outreach activities). There is also a formalized process for instituting new teams as issues evolve. Program development funds are available for groups who form themselves around issues and propose a working arrangement.

## **Alternative Faculty Approaches for Program Integration**

At MSU (as at most land-grant universities), in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources integration is built into virtually all faculty positions with two-way appointments (e.g., research/Extension or teaching/Extension), and three-way appointments are not unusual (Extension/research/teaching). Thus there are formal expectations and evaluation criteria for integration across missions. Still, this does not address the practicality of working within a team framework or building a program with active field-level integration. In this section, we discuss two recent campus-based specialists' approaches to program development, both originating from three-way appointments.

### **Approach Number One**

One of the authors was hired to work within a sector (specialty crops) with an emphasis on horticultural marketing. The charge was to focus on the linkage between marketing, management, and trade strategies of Michigan horticultural industries seeking to remain (or become) competitive in a global economy. As an Extension specialist new to the state, the author had to develop an understanding of the industries and their

needs and also to identify where her own expertise would make significant contributions.

AoE team meetings provided a central forum to make initial contacts with both campus and field staff and to introduce the author's skills and background. However, the meetings themselves proved an inadequate source for developing a comprehensive assessment of programming needs. Like many groups, the focus of AoE team meetings tended to be specific details of an ongoing nature (e.g., upcoming engagement dates, current crop conditions, etc.) and little discussion of "big picture" issues. While over a number of years, detailed discussions could aggregate to a broader understanding, they were not conducive to initially defining an integrated program.

The list of AoE team members, self-identified as to their own interests and skills, was a useful tool for scheduling individual (or small group) conversations about programming, and team members were valuable partners in connecting with industry participants. A number of research/Extension projects have been undertaken based on individual relationships and mutual interests developed within the AoE framework. While one eventually evolved to be labeled an AoE team program (e.g., Harsh, Thornsbury, Longstroth, Gaus, & Shane, 2004), most have incorporated a subset of team members interested in a specific topic.

Although the number of directly "relevant" AoE teams in this programming area is relatively few, each has developed its own unique pattern of operation, and only one normally schedules internal workshops that would accommodate "train-the-trainer" type of interactions. Nevertheless, teaching (and learning) does occur among members within the context of formal meetings, as the disciplines learn from each other. This can be particularly useful for disciplines that are less familiar to the group (e.g., economics, business management, and marketing).

## Approach Number Two

The other author was hired to work on human resource management in production agriculture, which cuts across the mission of many different AoE teams (e.g., Christmas trees, dairy, farm management, field crops, floriculture, fruit, nursery/landscape, pork, and vegetable teams). Additional teams also perceived this field as relevant to their work (e.g., leadership and economic development teams).

When initially hired, the author sought to be involved in all teams promoting agricultural labor as part of their mission. To establish an understanding and build trust, she attended regularly scheduled team meetings and presented an overview of this program area. After the first year, this time commitment seemed unsustainable, given the number of relevant teams. In addition, many services can be provided more efficiently across teams through newsletters, list servers, and Web pages. Therefore, contact with each team was eventually limited (i.e., participating in their list server, giving presentations about current research and program content, participating in team programming based on requests).

Even at this reduced level of involvement, the author was unable to participate in all initiatives for which her input was sought. The reduced level of presence at team activities resulted in decreased awareness about programming and, at times, lack of requests for involvement when it would be warranted. Continuous investment in team activities proved necessary to sustain working relationships and sufficient consideration of the subject matter in team projects.

Despite some limitations, the initial investment has resulted in good overall working relationships with teams, as demonstrated by participation in key team programs and development of team materials. The author has successfully involved a number of teams in combined research and Extension projects, which benefited the teams and their clientele. Four different teams worked intensively with the author on organizing focus group discussions on agricultural human resource management. These discussion groups were

instrumental in developing a framework for agricultural human resource management (e.g., Bitsch & Harsh, 2004; Bitsch, Abate Kassa, Harsh, & Mugeru, 2006; Bitsch & Olynk, 2008) and workshops to address the educational needs of different producer groups (Bitsch, 2007). Teams approached this process differently. While one team worked on the project and made most decisions as a team, in other teams, a number of individual members took initiative and engaged with the author on a mutual basis.

## Conclusions and Implications

Since the founding years of MSU's AoE teams, other land-grant universities have experimented with different kinds of team approaches to the delivery of Extension services, and the team structure within MSU has evolved. The original goals were to strengthen integration between campus and field staff, between research and Extension, and between disciplines. While these goals are still valid, logistics of application have changed with an increasing focus on accountability and documentation of impacts.

The AoE team concept has made it possible for MSU to continue to provide field coverage even with loss of field- and campus-level positions. Within the boundaries of team membership, AoE teams allow stakeholders access without consideration of disciplinary confines. For example, a person interested in blueberry production does not need to understand the differences between entomology and horticulture to find information on blueberry pests. On the other hand, where relevant topics are excluded, stakeholders will still face multiple search efforts.

In genera, the focus of AoE teams remains one of field-level perspective, how to actively integrate campus specialists into county-level Extension activities with less emphasis on integration in the other direction (i.e., how to get field staff more involved in campus-level programs and research). Therefore, it is not surprising that campus-based faculty often indicate lower satisfaction with operation and structure of teams compared to field staff (e.g., Seidl, 2003). However, while this focus presents some challenges, particularly related to the (perhaps unrewarded) time commitment required for active participation, it also offers significant benefits, including faster access to stakeholders and considerably shortened new faculty learning curves for both commodities and issue identification.

Two approaches for integration of on-campus Extension specialists identified a number of common lessons from working within the AoE team structure that will be useful for others seeking to participate in transdisciplinary teams. Based on these experiences from the campus specialist perspective, the AoE team structure can make positive contributions towards the goal of integrated Extension programs, both between campus and field staff and across missions. The contributions and challenges created by the AoE team structure are summarized in Table 1.

AoE teams improve cooperation in research projects between campus specialists of different disciplines and the likelihood of field collaboration. They also contribute to a broader dissemination of project results and inclusion of the latest findings in educational programs. They improve the awareness of skill sets and different perspectives among both campus and field staff and provide project and career opportunities. Many of the challenges stem from the on-going time commitment necessary to operate within this type of system and the county-driven focus of many AoE teams. Further challenges are created by certain inertia of an increasingly bureaucratic team structure.

**Table 1.**  
Contributions and Challenges of AoE Teams to Integrated Programs

Contributions	Challenges
AoE teams allow a more holistic approach to problem solving by creating a framework that allows members to step outside disciplinary boundaries.	AoE teams are for the most part still organized around commodities, whereas issues often cut across commodities.
AoE teams allow a more seamless integration of Extension and research functions as problem identification is eased, and the linkage between campus and field staff is facilitated.	AoE team participation is very time-intensive and requires commitment for some tasks that are not traditionally rewarded (i.e., team building).
AoE teams enhance the body of collective knowledge for both field and campus personnel and the awareness of who knows what.	Maintenance and cohesion of team relationships requires constant time and attention (i.e., team process skills).
AoE teams provide unique opportunities for cross-disciplinary teaching and learning among both campus and field staff, including fostering of the understanding of research approaches and protocols by field staff.	Participating campus specialists can be viewed as the only "face of campus" for field staff and/or stakeholders, thus skills of non-members are not sought out or recognized.
AoE teams provide a basis for more rapid building of trust among campus and field staff. AoE teams facilitate communication between campus and field staff. This can lead to broader dissemination of research results and their rapid inclusion in educational programs.	AoE teams can be perceived as a barrier to participation for campus and field staff without official Extension appointments or connection to a particular team. Rigid participation requirements hinder faculty commitment.
AoE teams provide a basis for immersion of new team members into issues important to stakeholders. Learning curves are shortened and comprehensive learning processes sped up through peer learning and mentoring relationships.	While the team itself helps to build demand for specialist skills, these demands may be beyond or only marginally related to the expertise of the faculty team member who often is asked for contributions outside of her/his core areas.
Shared leadership ensures that thoughts and concerns from campus and field perspectives are brought forward to the larger group.	AoE teams have not facilitated understanding of how administration and evaluation differ between campus and field.
AoE teams allow greater understanding of administrative tasks and skills, through rotation of team leadership. Such skill development may enhance career options for team members.	Lack of a specific Extension budget for campus specialists outside of the AoE structure can impede timely specialist response to evolving issues.
AoE teams provide a conduit for diverse	Complacent teams may hamper

perspectives in education and background to bear on problems to find creative solutions.	innovative programming, if venues for programming outside the AoE structure are limited.
AoE teams provide access to real life data and issues and fast connections to stakeholders, saving time in relationship building to gain entry.	AoE teams require advance information and input on any research projects involving their stakeholders and can preclude access for certain faculty.

To increase the timeliness of responses to evolving issues, AoE teams need to overcome challenges related to strict operating rules with defined membership that make it difficult for campus specialists, but also field staff, to move in and/or out of teams around particular issues. The mutual understanding of differences in administrative and incentive structures between campus and field should be improved to further the effectiveness of the AoE concept.

In recent years, Extension personnel at many universities have taken on some research responsibilities. For example, at Oregon State University about 15% of an Extension educator's duties are assigned to research. Based on the campus faculty experiences highlighted here, this approach is likely to increase mutual understanding of campus and field staff and across multiple missions. On the other hand, the same university has not succeeded in encouraging a reciprocal commitment of 15% outreach from research and teaching faculty. "Many research and teaching faculty believe that scholarly engagement is Extension's job" (McGrath, Conway, & Johnson, 2007).

According to the faculty experiences described, this attitude is not only damaging to the accomplishment of the Extension/outreach mission, but also prevents research and teaching from reaching their full potential due to lack of exchange. Common goals have often been identified among the most important prerequisites of team success in Extension (e.g., Kelbaugh & Earnest, 2008). Common responsibilities are one way to create the necessary goal convergence, but such commitments need to be mutual to succeed and not create resentments.

For field educator team members, working with campus specialists on educational program development and delivery, technology transfer, and facilitation (Bethel et al., 2006) is not sufficient to ensure long-term commitment from the campus side, especially with respect to faculty with no formal Extension or outreach appointments. A reciprocal exchange could involve research projects and/or on-campus teaching. While this may initially be perceived as an additional burden by already fully committed field staff, it will also enrich their work experience and opportunities. With regard to campus faculty with Extension appointments already engaged as team members, the same strategy will increase their willingness and ability to contribute to and take responsibility for team projects beyond their core expertise.

While innovative programming may require additional venues and budgetary provisions to be accessed outside of the team structure, the AoE concept has contributed a significant step towards facilitating the types of cross-disciplinary response suggested by the National Research Council (1996) and Kellogg Commission (2001) reports. The AoE framework enabled an established process for interaction that is viewed as a critical indicator of team success (Kelbaugh & Earnest, 2008). Not only communication between campus and field staff, but communication between campus departments and between campus and clientele is enhanced, and delivery of services has become both more efficient and more effective.

## Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Larry Hamm and Stephen Lovejoy for their candid engagement and willingness to discuss the Area of Expertise concept. Opinions expressed are, of course, the sole responsibility of the authors and do not represent Michigan State University (MSU).

## References

- Aguilar, C., & Thornsbury, S. (2005). Limited resourcesâ growing needs: Lessons learned in a process to facilitate program evaluation. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 43(6) Article 6FEA3. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2005december/a3.php>
- Bethel, M., Kells, J., Chatfield, J., Leholm, A., & Vlasin, R. (2006). Michigan State University Extension and Ohio State University Extension self-directed teams. In: *Increasing the odds of high-performance teams: Lessons learned*, ed. by Leholm, A. & Vlasin, R., Michigan State University Press: East Lansing, pp. 200-236.
- Bitsch, V. (2007). Managing human resources on farms: lessons learned during six years of assessment and programming. *Triennial National Farm Management Conference 'Professional Influencing Today's Agriculture.'* Retrieved December 22, 2009 from: <http://www.agrisk.umn.edu>
- Bitsch, V., Abate Kassa, G., Harsh, S. B., & Muger, A.W. (2006). Human resource management risks: Sources and control strategies based on dairy farmer focus groups. *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics*, 38(1): 123-136.
- Bitsch, V., & Harsh, S. B. (2004). Labor risk attributes in the green industry: Business owners' and managers' perspectives. *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics*, 36(3): 731-745.
- Bitsch, V., & Olynk, N. J. (2008). Risk-increasing and risk-reducing practices in human resource management: Focus group discussions with livestock managers. *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics*, 40(1): 185-201.
- Chatfield, J. A., Boggs, J. F., Gao, G. Y., Draper, E. A., Smith, K. L., Ludwig, B. G., & Baertsche, S. R. (2004). Teams change everything. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 42(2) Article 2FEA6. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2004april/a6.php>
- Harsh, S., Thornsbury, S., Longstroth, M., Gauss, A., & Shane, B. (2004). Guiding your fruit business into the future. Southwest Michigan Research and Extension Center, Michigan State University, Benton Harbor, MI.
- Kelbaugh, B. M., & Earnest, G. W. (2008). Indicators of success for teamwork: What Extension professionals need to excel as team members. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 46(4) Article 4FEA6. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2008august/a6.php>
- Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land Grant Universities. (2001). Returning to our roots: Executive summaries of the reports of the Kellogg Commission on the future of state and land grant universities. Retrieved December 22, 2009 from: <http://www.nasulgc.org/NetCommunity/Page.aspx?pid=305&srcid=751>

Koenig, R., Cerny-Koenig, R., Hefelbower, R., Mesner, N., Kopp, K., & Hill, R. (2004). A team approach enhances statewide water issues programming. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 42(3) Article 3TOT5. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2004june/tt5.php>

Leholm, A., Hamm, L., Suvedi, M., Gray, I., & Poston, F. (1999). Area of expertise teams: the Michigan approach to applied research and Extension. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 37(3) Article 3FEA3. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1999june/a3.php>

Mathieu, J., Maynard, M. T., Rapp, T., & Gilson, L. (2008). Team effectiveness 1997-2007: A review of recent advancements and a glimpse into the future. *Journal of Management*, 34(3): 410-76.

McGrath, D. M., Conway, F. D. L., & Johnson, S. (2007). The Extension hedgehog. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 45(2), Article 2FEA1. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2007april/a1.php>

Mullen, R. W., Thomison, P. R., Lentz, E. M., LaBarge, G. A., & Watters, H. (2007). Delivering timely Extension information with the agronomic crops team in Ohio. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 45(4), Article 4IAW4. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2007august/iw4.php>

National Research Council Committee on the Future of the Colleges of Agriculture in the Land Grant University System. (1996). *Colleges of Agriculture at the Land Grant Universities: Public service and public policy*. Washington D.C.: National Academy Press. Retrieved December 22, 2009 from: [http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=5133](http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=5133)

Patton, M. Q. (1987). The Extension organization of the future. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 25(1) Article 1FUT1. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1987spring/fut1.php>

Pohl, C. (2008). From science to policy through transdisciplinary research. *Environmental Science and Policy*. 11:46-53.

Seidl, A. (2003). Multi-tiered, multi-disciplinary work teams: The CSU CAFO work group tackles controversial public issues. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 41(2) Article 2FEA2. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2003april/a2.php>

Taylor, W. (2004). Program leadership: Do teams work? *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 42(2) Article 2FEA3. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2004april/a5.php>

Torppa, C. B., & Smith, K. L. (2009). An examination of the impact of organizational restructuring on identification within Extension. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 47(6) Article 6RIB1. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2009december/rb1.php>

Ukaga, O. M., Reichenbach, M. R., Blinn, C. R., Zak, D. M., Hutchison, W. D., & Hegland, N. J. (2002). Building successful campus and field faculty teams. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 40(2) Article 2FEA3. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2002april/a3.php>

---

*Copyright* © by *Extension Journal, Inc.* ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the *Journal Editorial Office*, [joe-ed@joe.org](mailto:joe-ed@joe.org).

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#).