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Extension Online: Utilizing Technology to Enhance Educational Outreach

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Abstract: *Extension Online is an Internet-based online course platform that enables the Texas AgriLife Extension Service's Family Development and Resource Management (FDRM) unit to reach tens of thousands of users across the U.S. annually with research-based information. This article introduces readers to Extension Online by describing the history of its development, outcomes achieved over a 5-year period, system features, and the strategies that have led to the growth of the online system. In 2011, over 77,000 online courses were completed through Extension Online, demonstrating that technology can be successfully used to dramatically enhance Extension's outreach capabilities.*

Introduction

Recent advances in information technology provide Extension educators with opportunities to dramatically expand their outreach to the general public. According to the Federal Communications Commission, 78% of adults in the U.S. are Internet users, including 65% who have access to broadband Internet services in their homes (Horrigan, 2010). The percentage of adults who use the Internet increases substantially in higher income households (95% earning \$75,000 or more a year use the Internet); however, even at lower income levels, Americans are frequent users of the Internet (Jansen, 2010). For example, 57% of adults earning less than

\$30,000, and 80% of adults with annual incomes between \$30,000 and \$49,999 use the Internet on a regular basis (Jansen, 2010).

Other related technological developments, such as mobile connectivity and social networking, are changing the manner in which the general public accesses information (Purcell, 2012). Many within the Cooperative Extension System (CES) are well aware of the implications for Extension of new and emerging technologies, as evidenced by the December 2011 issue of the *Journal of Extension*. The lead article, however, makes the case that Extension's popularity is suffering with Internet users (Rader, 2011). While the author makes some valid observations regarding challenges facing Extension's use of the Internet as an outreach vehicle, there are examples of ongoing and highly successful Extension efforts in the technology arena.

One such example is Extension Online, an Internet-based online course platform developed by the Texas AgriLife Extension Service's Family Development and Resource Management (FDRM) unit. The purpose of this article is to provide readers with an introduction to Extension Online, demonstrating how such a tool can be used to reach tens of thousands of users across the U.S. annually with research-based information.

Extension Online—A Brief History

Recognizing the potential to expand the FDRM unit's outreach to various clientele groups (e.g., child care providers), in the early 2000s, a small group of content and information technology experts in the FDRM unit began designing an online course platform that would enable Texans to access online courses to meet state-mandated professional development requirements. Although various platforms already existed, most lacked important features (e.g., ability to access participants' pre- and post-test data, enable users to register for and/or complete courses on demand, etc.).

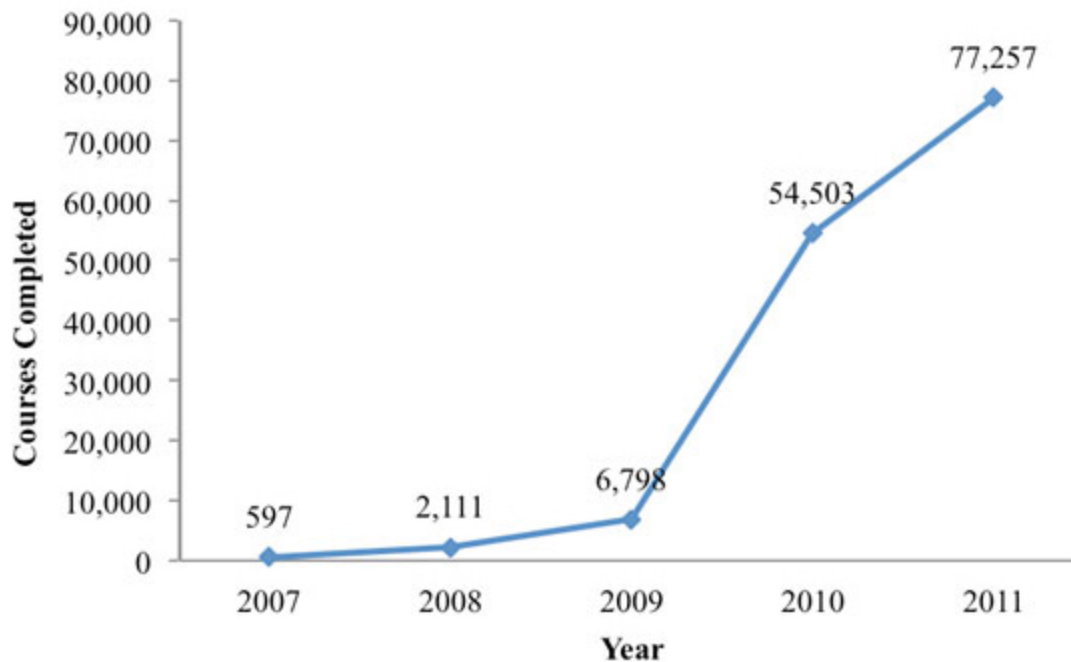
After many months of planning and programming, in 2005 Extension Online was launched. Only a few courses were made available to the public at the time; however, this enabled the development team to test the effectiveness of the system. By the end of 2005, participants in Texas completed 49 online courses.

Improvements were made to the system, and by the end of 2007, nearly 600 online courses were completed by participants. In subsequent years, additional online courses were developed, and improvements were made to the system that paralleled advances in technology (e.g., broadband Internet access). By the end of 2011, over

77,000 online courses were completed by audiences in and outside of Texas, a 12,840% increase from 2007. Figure 1 shows Extension Online course completions from 2007-2011. Based on average course completions for the first two months of 2012, it is estimated that over 130,000 online courses will be completed nationally by the end of the year.

Figure 1.

Extension Online Course Completions (2007-2011)



Extension Online Features

Extension Online contains a number of features that enable content specialists to reach a broad audience with high-quality, research-based information in numerous subject matter fields. New users can create free user accounts that enable them to enroll in and/or complete courses in a convenient and affordable manner. Users can access course catalogs based on content areas (e.g., child care, health, nutrition, etc.), enroll in and complete courses any time, pay for courses via credit card, start and stop courses as needed, download and print course handouts, view video demonstrations, listen to voice-narrated content, print certificates of completion, and view personal transcripts.

Features for course authors include an administrative site that allows authors to post course content (e.g., scripts, videos, handouts, pre-post questions, evaluation surveys, etc.). In addition, course authors have access to online course statistics

such as enrollments and completions (searchable by month, year, course titles, names of students), pre- and post-test scores, geographic distribution of participants, and course evaluations.

Strategies That Have Led to the Growth of Extension Online

While certainly not an exhaustive list, the following strategies implemented by AgriLife Extension's FDRM unit have led to the substantial growth of Extension Online. Moreover, the strategies described below are applicable to all Extension professionals interested in offering online education to existing and new audiences.

- **Maintain a Simple, yet Flexible Online Course Delivery System.** Behind the scenes (i.e., programming code), the Extension Online platform is quite complex; however, to the average user the system is simple to navigate. Moreover, it is flexible, allowing users to enroll in and complete a variety of courses at a time and place of their own choosing.
- **Offer Quality Content That Is Affordable.** All course content is developed by experts in their respective fields and is based on the latest research. Courses are offered at a variety of price points (e.g., \$7 for a 1-hour course, \$14 for a 2-hour course) depending on length. In addition, Extension Online offers a series of free courses at all times, which has drawn considerable traffic to the site.
- **Add New Courses Regularly.** Each year, new courses are added to Extension Online, enabling users to return to the site regularly to obtain required professional development training. New courses are based on audience needs and the latest trends in the subject matter areas addressed by the FDRM unit.
- **Utilize Online Marketing Tools.** Considerable effort is given to marketing Extension Online utilizing Internet-based tools and strategies that increase the site's visibility to target audiences. As a result, Extension Online and its subject matter subdirectories often appear at the top of Google Search page results.
- **Seek Out External Funding for Expansion.** Extension Online has expanded in recent years through external funding that has enabled the FDRM unit to create new courses, hire additional tech support, and add customizable features to strengthen the online course platform.

To learn more about Extension Online, go to <<http://extensiononline.tamu.edu>>, or e-mail Dr. Stephen Green at s-green@tamu.edu.

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