

Examining Extension's Capacity in Community Resource and Economic Development: Viewpoints of Extension Administrators on the Role of Community Resource and Economic Development in the Extension Portfolio

Abstract

The survey-based research reported here offers insights on community, resource, and economic development (CRED) Extension programming at the national and regional level. The results present a national picture of CRED programming, research, and potential future programming opportunities that Extension could capitalize on. The research shows that CRED resources are primarily being allocated to regional or campus-based personnel, with fewer county-based positions. It provides information for CRED Extension professionals and administrators useful in identifying potential program weaknesses, strengths, and potential opportunities, while enabling them to better articulate the value of CRED Extension programming in an age of budgetary constraints and competition.

Seth C. Urbanowitz
Extension Educator
University of Nevada
Reno, Nevada
White Pine County
urbanowitzs@unce.unr.edu

Michael D. Wilcox Jr.
Assistant Program
Leader
Economic and
Community
Development
Purdue University
West Lafayette,
Indiana
Wilcox16@purdue.edu

Introduction

As the primary public outreach function of the land-grant universities, Extension's duty is to bring the immense human capital and research-based programs from the university to bear on locally defined problems that are relevant to a diverse constituency.

Since its inception in 1914, Extension has altered its programming and broadened its mission to adapt to technological and demographic changes (Ratchford, 1984; Cowan, 2001; Smaldone, Boone, Selin, & See, 2011). One of these changes has been Extension's continued and broadening involvement in the community resource and economic development (CRED) Extension program area. In 1961, Section 3(d) of the Smith-Lever Act was added to allow for national funding for programs that addressed the pertinent issues of the time; among these was community resource and economic development programming (S 372, 1961). Title V of the Rural Development Act of 1972 further

expanded and altered the way in which Extension works in community development. Under the Rural Development Act, Extension programs were to consist of "coordinated and integrated community initiatives that advance and empower capacity building through leadership development, entrepreneurship, business development, and management training and strategic planning to increase jobs, income, and quality of life in rural communities" (Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act, 1972).

With the financial and human capital in place, the role and approach of the CRED Extension program has evolved over time to solve locally defined problems. Initially, Extension professionals interested in CRED had the question of how best to engage in the community to address the relevant issues and the educational components, approaches, and boundaries were (Cosgriffe, 1968). After nearly 15 years of maturation, Sargent (1973) described the role of the educator as "helping decision makers make better decisions through improved knowledge." Conglose (2000) outlined the four goals of CRED Extension work as provide perspective on development issues, increase the knowledge base for individual and community decisions, develop the skills necessary to achieve individual and community goals, and help shape the decision making environment.

The process of community development has become focused on solving complex community issues through collaborative, integrated Extension programming and youth inclusion in community building (Brennan, Barnett, & Baugh, 2007; Jayaratne, Bradley, & Driscoll, 2009). In an effort to support sustainable change, a collaborative approach with multiple partners and educators is often sought to address the multifaceted nature of many community issues (Jayaratne, Bradley, & Driscoll, 2009). This highlights the ability of CRED Extension work to change to meet the local needs overtime and the propensity to work collaboratively across disciplines.

Despite CRED becoming a recognized component of the Extension System, there is a dearth of information related to the resources devoted to this program area. Ahearn, Yee, and Bottum (2003) reported on statistics of human resource allocations from 1977 to 1992, finding that human resource allocations to CRED had declined in this period at the national level. The authors found that share of full time equivalent personnel (FTE) devoted to CRED Extension work varied from region to region, with the North Central having the greatest share at 8% and the South having the smallest share each year with 4%. Little has been done since to present a national picture of CRED and research or resource allocation differences among regions.

Given the initial efforts of Ahearn, Yee, and Bottum (2003) and the lack of additional analysis during a period that witnessed the emergence of a CRED Extension professional organization (National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals), the reorganization of the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) into the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), and the budgetary crises experienced by many states' Extension Services and the Regional Rural Development Centers due to the effects of the "Great Recession" and legislative budget priorities, an organizational survey is of paramount importance. Descriptive organizational surveys can provide administrators with important insights by offering a clearer picture of an organization or organizational subunit from which informed decisions could be made (Smith, 2003). Data collection is also an essential tool in organizational learning and development, and aids the organization in obtaining a valid image of itself, assessing weaknesses or shortfalls, and strategic

planning (Nadler, 1977).

The survey undertaken for the study reported here represents an attempt to inform a valid image of national and regional organizational capacities in the CRED Extension program area. Understanding regional differences in programming and resource allocations enables decision makers in Extension to communicate how Extension significantly impacts the communities it serves through efficient investments in a time of increased budgetary pressure and resource competitiveness. Furthermore, timely identification of emerging issues related to Extension programming and research, threats to fulfilling organizational mission, and capitalizing on opportunities for tangible and sustained impact will allow Extension to more effectively serve the communities in which it operates. The purpose of the study reported here was to address these issues, within the context of CRED, through an examination of the current status and potential future of CRED Extension programs from the viewpoint of Extension Directors and Administrators from across the United States.

Methods

The purpose of the study was to ascertain the attitudes and perceptions of Extension administrators and directors in regards to the perceived role, function, and direction of CRED Extension programming as well as the social-environmental factors that could be affecting system resources. The study was conducted by using a cross-sectional and descriptive research design. A Web-based survey was distributed electronically through email to all administrators and directors of the Cooperative Extension Service due to their position and responsibility within the Extension system. The population was also chosen due to the fact that directors and administrators influence the activities of the group and attitudes of personnel, help to create a shared vision within the organization, and are responsible for allocating funds, providing organizational support, and guiding and implementing policy (Senge, 1990; Yukl, 1998). Perceptions of resources were used as a proxy for resource allocations and are not considered absolute. The following research objectives were used to guide the research:

1. To gain insight into regional and national CRED Extension efforts
2. To describe the political and social issues facing CRED Extension in the U.S.
3. To examine the perceptions and attitudes of Extension administrators and directors regarding research and programming priorities in the U.S.
4. To examine the perceived role of CRED professionals held by administrators and directors in the U.S.

The purpose of the Web-based instrument, created in Market Research Interview (MR Interview), was to elicit perceptions regarding CRED Extension efforts, function, and role as well as the external environment in which it functions. Following the recommendations of Dillman (2000) that university faculty, government employees, and other professionals make ideal candidates for email-based surveys, an online survey instrument was selected because of the wide geographical area covered and timeliness of distribution and response rates.

The instrument's content and face validity were assessed several times by different specialists in the Extension system. Comments on content by all specialists contributed to the validity and reliability of the instrument by improving the clarity of the questions asked. Validity was continually assessed pre-implementation by several members of the Southern Program Leadership Network-Community Resource Development (PLN-CRD) committee, which reviewed the instrument with comments on content. An Evaluation and Staff Development Extension Specialist from the University of Tennessee reviewed the instrument and made comments on content. An evaluation of the instrument was done by an assistant director of a regional rural development center and a CRED state specialist to assess face and content validity. A pilot test was also employed to test the validity and reliability of the survey. Two deans from the sample population tested the survey and made comments on content, which improved validity and reliability through improved clarity of the instrument.

Several methods were used to improve the response rate of the population, which was anticipated to be low due to the deluge of surveys that administrators and directors in Extension receive and the multitude of demands on their time. Following Dillman (2000), a multiple contact strategy to overcome the potential for a low response rate was employed. An email was sent by a University of Tennessee CRED Extension specialist to fellow colleagues across the land-grant system urging them to follow-up with their institution's appropriate administrator as the instrument was designed with the potential to be a partial fulfillment of the Southern PLN-CRD Committees 2010 Plan of Work. An email was then sent by the director of the Southern Rural Development Center prompting the population to respond. Personalization of the initial message and the following reminders was also done to increase the response rate. The final reminder was personalized with information on current response rates of the region to all those who had not yet completed the survey. Brevity was of the utmost importance because of the heavy reliance on email by the population and the deluge of surveys that they receive fostering less attentive reading behavior (Dillman, 2000).

Invitations to participate were sent via email with an attached Word document that contained the live survey link as well as an explanation of the purpose of the survey. The population consisted of 115 administrators and directors (N=115) of institutions with land-grant status. Regional variation was tested for using MANOVA/ANOVA analyses for numerical data and chi-squared analysis for categorical data. Regions were grouped according to the Regional Rural Development Centers that the state or territory was represented by.

Participants were instructed to state responses using three different Likert-type scales that were later used for data analyses. The scales were as follows:

1. Where "strongly disagree" represented 1, "disagree" 2, "neutral" 3, "agree" 4, and "strongly agree" 5 (1=SD, 2=D, 3=NA or "Neutral", 4=A, 5=SA);
2. Where "least important" represented 1, "not very important" 2, "neutral" 3, "somewhat important" 4, "most important" 5;
3. Where "very negatively" represented 1, "negatively" 2, "neutral" 3, "positively" 4, "very positively" 5.

Results

The overall response rate was 36.5% (n=42). Regional response rate was 40.4% for the South, 26.1% for the Northeast, 16.6% for the North Central, and 16.6% for the West. Overall, 35 1862 institutions and seven 1890 institutions responded. The study found limited regional variation and a relatively unified voice for Extension's involvement in and definition of CRED programming.

Objective one was to describe current efforts, as qualified by human and financial resources allocated to this programmatic area and to test for regional differences. The vast majority of respondents (83%) perceived total budget allocations to CRED to be less than 10% of their total budget. Statistically significant variation between regions was found in the percent of budget allocated to CRED programming. Tables 1 and 2 show the frequency and cumulative percent of the total budget allocated to CRED programming and the variation between regions. The Southern region had the largest proportion of respondents that reported allocating the lowest proportion of their budget to CRED programming.

Table 1.

Percent of Extension Budget Devoted to CRED Programming*

Dependent Variable	Frequency	Cumulative Percent
1%-5%	15	35.7
6%-10%	20	83.3
11%-15%	3	90.5
16%-20%	1	92.9
21%-25%	2	97.6
51+ %	1	100.0
*Question in survey "Approximately what percentage of the Extension System's budget at your institution was devoted to CRED programming in fiscal year 2009?"		

Table 2.

Regional Variation of Extension System Resources Devoted to CRED Programming

	Independent Variable		1%-5%	6% or more	Total
Region	South*	Count	10	7	17
		% within Region	58.8%	41.2%	100.0%

		Adjusted Residual	2.6	-2.6	
	Northeast	Count	3	8	11
		% within Region	27.3%	72.7%	100.0%
		Adjusted Residual	-.7	.7	
	North Central	Count	2	5	7
		% within Region	28.6%	71.4%	100.0%
		Adjusted Residual	-.4	.4	
	West*	Count	0	7	7
		% within Region	.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		Adjusted Residual	-2.2	2.2	
	Total	Count	15	27	42
		% within Region	35.7%	64.3%	100.0%
* Significant Regional Variation.					

A measure of perceived distribution of human resource allocations among the base four program areas showed that Agriculture and Natural Resources (49.74%) was the program area receiving greatest proportion of human resources, followed by Family and Consumer Science (22.59%), 4-H/Youth Development (22.23%), and CRED (8.31%). With respect to human resource allocations, there was no regional variation found for the CRED program area. The human resources (FTE's) allocated to each programmatic area over the last 2 years were perceived as not increasing, with nearly 80% either decreasing or remaining the same for all four program areas in all regions. Of those FTE's devoted to CRED programming, it was perceived that over two thirds did not serve at the local, county level. Over half (53.2%) of the FTE's devoted to CRED programming were perceived as being campus-based, while 14.7% were perceived as region based, and 29.2% were perceived as being county-based. However, the standard deviations at the national level, 32.54, 25.19, and 32.85 for campus, region, and county-based, respectively, point to potentially significant state differences in the distribution of CRED FTE's within the state in which they serve.

Respondents perceived the number of FTE's devoted to CRED research and programming as insufficient to meet institutional CRED objectives. The research and programming done was also

perceived as not meeting the needs of the public. Table 3 depicts perceptions related to CRED Extension efforts. Based on survey responses, resource availability is perceived as a major constraint on Extension's ability to meet the CRED needs of their constituents.

Table 3.
Efforts; Combined County and Campus-Based FTE's

Dependent Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
The current programming done by CRED county-level professionals matches the needs of those counties.	2.48	1.21
The current research done by CRED university-based specialists matches your state's needs.	2.36	0.95
CRED programming is sufficient to meet your Extension System's community development objectives.	2.31	0.97
The current level of funded FTE's is sufficient for the Extension System at your institution.	2.07	0.97
The number of Extension FTE's devoted to CRED research is sufficient at your institution.	1.98	0.83
The number of funded FTE's devoted to CRED Extension programming is sufficient at your institution.	1.93	0.83

In terms of financial capital, Extension funding was perceived as originating from state sources 45%, federal sources 27%, local sources 19.5%, and private sources 13.3%. The respondents perceived state budget constraints (mean 4.10, std. deviation .906) as limiting support for CRED programming and were neutral as to whether external grant support (mean 3.05, std. deviation .987), federal budget constraints (mean 3.29, std. deviation 1.01) or local budget constraints (mean 3.36, std. deviation 1.1) affected support for CRED Extension programming.

Objective two sought insight into any social-political issues facing CRED Extension programming and Extension as a whole. Respondents did not perceive university-level support (mean 2.98, std. deviation 1.07) or program relevance (mean 2.50, 1.08) as limiting support for CRED Extension efforts. Respondents perceived that increased external organizational linkages (mean 4.12, std. deviation .504) and increased use of mass media (mean 4.00, std. deviation .911) would build political support and awareness for CRED Extension efforts. It was found that the South (mean 4.47) differed significantly from the North Central (mean 3.00) in regards to the increased use of mass media.

Objective three sought to describe current research and programming priorities as well as identifying emerging issues that CRED Extension would be well positioned to capitalize on. Table 4 outlines the top five current research, Extension programming and emerging issues related to CRED.

Table 4.
Current Research, Extension Programming, and Emerging Issues

Research	% Yes	Programming	% Yes	Emerging Issues	% Yes
Sustainable Development	61.9%	Leadership and Civic Engagement	92.9%	Sustainable Development	64.3%
Economic Development	61.9%	Economic Development	81.0%	Workforce Development	64.3%
Natural Resources and Environmental Management	59.5%	Sustainable Development	71.4%	Economic Development	61.9%
Agriculture in Transition	54.8%	Natural Resources and Environmental Management	66.7%	Natural Resources and Environmental Management	57.1%
Health and Nutrition	47.6%	Health and Nutrition	59.5%	Population Change/Immigration	57.1%

Objective four sought to examine the perceived role of CRED Extension program in the Extension portfolio as well as what might be the most important specializations for CRED professionals to possess to most effectively work in community and economic development. Administrators perceived Extension as having a significant role to play in CRED (mean 4.43, std. deviation .668) and as essential to achieving the mission of the Extension System (mean 4.38, std. deviation .854). However, there remains confusion as to how best achieve CRED objectives. Administrators were neutral (mean 3.31, std. deviation 1.31) as to whether CRED Extension efforts could be accomplished through the family and consumer science, agriculture and natural resources, and/or 4-H youth development programming.

Table 5 presents respondents perceptions regarding the specializations that would allow CRED Extension professional to most effectively work in CRED. There were significant regional differences found in public issues education as a specialization that would allow CRED Extension professionals to effectively work in community and economic development. The North Central was significantly more likely to find public issues education to be more important (mean 4.71) than the Northeast (mean 3.81).

Table 5.
Perceived Importance of CRED Extension Personnel Specializations**

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Dependent Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
Leadership and Civic Engagement	4.60	.544
Economic Development	4.57	.630
Group Process and Facilitation	4.43	.590
Organizational Development	4.31	.715
Local Government	4.24	.759
Public Issues Education*	4.17	.660
Workforce Development	4.05	.825
Natural Resources	4.02	.841
*Significant Regional Variation.		
** Question in survey "Please indicate the level of importance for the areas of specialization that CRED Extension professionals should possess to work effectively in economic and community development in your state."		

Administrators perceived CRED Extension as inadequately serving limited resource individuals (mean 2.83, std. deviation .794) and minority populations (mean 2.88, std. deviation .861). Table 6 depicts respondents' perceptions regarding whom Extension serves and provides insight into uncertainty surrounding how involved Extension CRED professionals are in rural and urban communities.

Table 6.
Perceived CRED Extension Audience

Dependent Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
Our CRED Extension programming has primarily rural clientele.	3.26	1.127
Our CRED Extension programming is significantly involved in urban communities.	3.10	1.008
Our CRED Extension programming serves minority populations adequately.	2.88	.861
Our CRED Extension programming serves limited resource individuals adequately.	2.83	.794

Implications for Extension

A political contract influenced by social perceptions of organizational effectiveness allocates resources to Extension (Warner & Christenson, 1984). Administrators perceived that political support was not

waning for Extension CRED programming or the Extension System as a whole. However, the current research and programming was perceived as not aligning with the needs of the public at the county and state levels. Furthermore, the level of funded FTE's devoted to Extension CRED research and programming was perceived as insufficient. Administrators also perceived Extension CRED work as failing to adequately serve minorities and limited resource individuals. Roughly 80% of the U.S population is now urban, with over 34% of the U.S. claiming minority status (Ahearn, Yee, & Bottum, 2003; Minckler, 2008). The growth rate of minorities and urban areas is continuing to rise, with implications for funding if Extension does not adequately serve a broader audience. Effectively serving all citizens is an obligation as the public-outreach educational service of the land-grant universities and is essential to the credibility and image of the organization. These issues highlight potential serious political consequences as to how long the public's community resource and economic development educational needs can go unmet without negatively affecting legislator and public support. Paluszek (1992) contends that Extension has a reputation deficit and that it must boost communication if it is to retain increasingly redirected public funds.

Administrators perceived that increased use of mass communication and increased external organizational linkages would improve political support and awareness for Extension. In a competitive environment with increasing budget constraints, Extension must clarify its role in the economic development educational process, speak with a unified voice to potential stakeholders, and continue to demonstrate its worth to society through creative programming. Positioning Extension CRED to capitalize on emerging issues by recruiting those personnel with specializations that enable Extension to meet the needs of the public will aid in organizational support among stakeholders. Furthermore, increasing external organizational linkages and the use of various forms of mass media will improve political support and public awareness of all that Extension has to offer as the primary outreach component of land-grant institutions.

Recommendations

- Increase the capacity of CRED Extension programming to better serve multicultural, minority, and limited-resource populations through cultural training and language training for existing personnel.
- Strengthen core capacities of CRED Extension programming while observing emerging opportunities on which Extension could capitalize.
- Continue the use of consistent programmatic themes across state boundaries to communicate effectively to stakeholders/decision-makers.
- Increase the use of various forms of mass media to communicate the appropriate image and build awareness of all that Extension has to offer.
- Develop external organizational linkages to improve effective programming and build political support.
- Consistently engage diverse audiences at the county level to ensure awareness and effective programming that meets the needs of the public.

- Help to ensure that research and educational programming are meeting the needs of the public through increased joint research-Extension responsibilities.

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