A Return to the Basics: The Solution for eXtension

Abstract

Engagement must be the overarching goal of the land-grant system. eXtension continues to have phenomenal potential to allow new and expanded audiences access to Extension expertise and solutions, and be a driver of expanding engagement in the land-grant system, but stakeholders are asking difficult questions. If successful, eXtension could transform and expand the land-grant engagement mission. But eXtension's success is not assured. This Commentary, endorsed by a dozen Extension leaders nationwide, provides specific suggestions for how eXtension can survive and lead that transformation.

Dave King
Associate Provost for Outreach and Engagement
Oregon State University
Corvallis, Oregon
dave.king@oregonstate.edu

Mike Boehlje
Distinguished Professor, Agricultural Economics
Purdue University
West Lafayette, Indiana
boehljem@purdue.edu

Engagement must be the overarching goal of the land-grant system.

Engagement energizes learning and discovery. Providing access to the land-grant knowledge base is essential for learners to be successful, have productive careers, advance in the workplace, and contribute to society. In a recent article published by the American Council on Education, Louis Soares (2012) suggests that "to keep its competitive edge in the global, innovation-based economy, the United States needs to increase the number of Americans that possess postsecondary levels of academic and applied skills" (p. 1).

It is time for the Extension system as a whole to step up and provide the leadership within higher education necessary to keep our public universities competitive. To do that, the national eXtension initiative must become an active part of making the needed changes.

eXtension continues to have phenomenal potential to allow new and expanded audiences access to Extension expertise and solutions, but many stakeholders are asking difficult questions. Some directors are refusing to provide their states' assessments. At the 2012 Association of Public and Land-grant Universities annual meeting, some of the hallway conversation about eXtension was alarmingly negative.

If successful, eXtension could transform and expand the land-grant engagement mission. But

eXtension's success is not assured; indeed, eXtension has not been successful in engaging the public and local Extension offices.

In 2000, we wrote the *Journal of Extension* Commentary calling for the creation of eXtension (King & Boehlje, 2000a). Since then, we have monitored eXtension's progress. Events during the intervening 13 years, concerns among Extension directors, and discussions among the eXtension leadership indicate that a review of foundational concepts is necessary.

Let's briefly examine the original analysis that brought eXtension to reality, in the context of current conditions and recent scholarship:

- Evans and Wurster (2000) suggested that organizations attempting to be competitive in the information marketplace need to be navigators in the sea of information. This need continues to increase as technology and competition transform the learning and discovery marketplace.

- Using Clayton Christensen's broadly applied theory of disruptive innovation, (Christensen, 2000; Christensen & Eyring, 2011), we identified eXtension as a disruptive innovation with the potential to reach what Christensen calls *non-consumers*—those not currently being served by Extension.

- More recently, Franz and Cox (2012) described disruptive innovation as innovation that provides new value through "affordability, accessibility, capacity, responsiveness, simplicity, or customization of a process or product." eXtension could meet this definition of disruptive innovation.

Business Model Structure

In a demand-driven environment, eXtension must develop a new business model that creates, delivers, and captures value. The new business model should include the following:

- Customer value proposition, which explains how an organization will address a customer need

- Value chain, which organizes processes, partners, and resources to deliver the value proposition

- Profit formula, which lays out how an organization will cover costs

- Competitive strategy, which describes how an organization will compete and defend its position in the value network (Sheets & Crawford, 2012)

Establishing such a business model will focus land-grant university expertise on value-added programming that will sustain a fee structure. In addition, this will require actively pursuing corporate and philanthropic grants from entities with interest in expanding access to knowledge. However, to be credible with these sources of support, eXtension must demonstrate an ability to directly respond to audience needs. As Christensen, Horn, and Johnson (2008) say, eXtension will need to recognize exactly what learners "hire" it to do for them and what they expect the outcome of the exchange to be. This is more than offering the process; it is knowing exactly what impact is expected—and delivering.

Financial Sustainability

Initially, we suggested the investment from federal and state sources, used as a foundation for eXtension, should be able to generate a return on that investment (King & Boehlje, 2000b). We even suggested that at stability, two-thirds of the revenue to operate the enterprise would be from grants, fees, and contracts, and one-third would be the foundation funds—seed capital—from assessment and federal allocation. This is still an attainable target if eXtension's focus is more entrepreneurial.

Cost-recovery outreach focuses on demand (target audience needs) rather than supply (what we have to sell). It requires a significant shift for eXtension. Instead of offering what Extension has, eXtension must adapt the land-grant knowledge base to the needs of the audience. In 1998, as we analyzed how information creates value and began applying these concepts to the Extension system, this shift emerged as one of the most critical factors for long-term success (Boehlje & King, 1998).

However, true disruptive innovation may not be attainable and often is not an organizational priority, from within an established enterprise such as Extension (Christensen, 2000). It appears this may be the case with entrepreneurial cost-recovery outreach. For example, Oregon State University has resorted to establishing a cost-recovery outreach program that is aligned with Extension but not within the existing Extension structure (King & LaBelle, 2013).

Focus on Effective Engagement

During the past century, Extension has been successful when it engaged the people served and integrated those people's needs or demands with the university's expertise and solutions. In doing so, engagement energized the other two mission areas of learning and discovery.

At the end of the McDowell lecture at The Pennsylvania State University's Extension annual conference in 1999, we closed with the thought that to be successful, eXtension will have to "learn as much as we teach" (King & Boehlje, 2000b). Today, we define effective university engagement the same way. We must "listen as much as we talk; learn as much as we teach" (King, 2012).

The move from supply-side offerings to meeting the demands of target audiences will require incorporating users and stakeholders more widely into eXtension Communities of Practice. eXtension should provide funding for Communities of Practice only if at least 50% of the active members are users and stakeholders. eXtension should actively promote crowdsourcing and citizen science—by demonstrating tangible examples of how these opportunities provide value to learners in the short and long term.

True disruptive innovation focuses on the non-consumer (Christensen, 2000). From our first discussions about the eXtension idea, we have been convinced that attracting non-consumers is crucial to the success of eXtension, as well as Extension as a whole. Some states (e.g., Oregon between 1986 and 2006) have lost as much as 50% of their audience or market share in 20 years. That trajectory can't be sustained.

Attracting non-consumers to Extension and eXtension will require a major philosophic and

paradigmatic shift. Communities of Practice will need to incorporate detailed, granular market assessment into their activities, and eXtension should determine the success of Communities of Practice on the basis of how well those communities meet non-consumers' needs. Aggregating the granular needs assessments into broader regional and national opportunities will be critical for the success of the cost-recovery outreach effort.

There are positive signals. eXtension has just reported that of the people who connect to the eXtension-based Ask an Expert system nationwide, 57% are new to Extension (Meisenbach, 2013). This should continue to provide a foundation for growth with new audiences.

Also critical will be providing ways for people to find their own way through the labyrinth of the university knowledge base. eXtension should expand its existing capability for providing search-based access to all Extension information nationwide and make the existing access point more user friendly and openly accessible. eXtension needs a stronger focus on providing primary access to non-consumers through these direct data access efforts. One idea is to approach Google (or some other big data expert) about a partnership to create "Google Extension," similar to Google Scholar and other segmented access points developed and managed by Google.

Governance

Effective, transparent, and representative governance is critical to the success of any enterprise in the competitive information marketplace. It should be transparent so that internal audiences as well as all potential participants and stakeholders know what to expect from whom. Governance should be representative of a larger set of potential users who have, or could have, a stake in success.

eXtension should have a multidisciplinary board of directors. The new board should represent multiple sectors, including president/vice president-level land-grant university leadership; corporate partner leadership; and NGO/agency leadership such as NIFA, NSF, and NIH, as well as environmental, social, and health care organizations.

The current eXtension governing board should become an advisory body, perhaps as a commission of APLU, with a chair elected by the Extension system. This newly revised advisory committee should, through the elected chair, offer input from the overall Extension system but not make executive decisions.

The eXtension leadership team should have a more corporate structure, with the eXtension CEO, CFO, elected board chair, and elected advisory chair acting as a day-to-day executive team.

Conclusion

Consider where the land-grant system could be if we harness the disruptive innovation presently shaping our future and turn it to our advantage. *Imagine* a truly 21st century land-grant university:

- A university that is an example of true engagement

- A university where instruction covers the continuum from individual interaction to many people learning together and interacting with world-class experts on and off campus

- A university that fosters lifelong learning

- A university that offers dramatically expanded access to learning through online and blended education

- A university where research is truly discovery that drives innovation and brings economic growth and stability

- A university where outreach focuses on engaging and enabling communities—of place and of interest—with faculty who are embedded in all these communities

- A university that offers a spectrum of access from raw data to outreach learning modules to full credit courses

- A knowledge economy driven by access to the public university knowledge base, empowering thousands of people who continuously seek to be competitive by pursuing more learning

A truly 21st century land-grant university will be all these things and more. It will inextricably link discovery, learning, and engagement while continuing to fulfill its long-standing mandate to provide access to the university knowledge base. It will be as different from its competitors and pretenders as it was at its inception. It will be the foundation for any and all innovation by the best and brightest, both on campus and off. Just imagine (King, 2012).

eXtension has the potential to be the first step to this new 21st century land-grant university.

Acknowledgments

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