

A National Framework for Urban Extension

Abstract

To help ensure Extension's relevance and accessibility to an increasingly diverse population, the National Urban Extension Leaders group created a framework based on historical and emerging developments. Themes focus on programs, personnel, partnership, and the positioning of Extension at local, state, and national levels. For Extension to be a vibrant and resilient 21st-century system, it must build on best practices, leverage regional and national networks, and invest in innovative strategies that engage people living and working in metropolitan communities. A robust urban Extension presence contributes to building strong connectivity among urban, suburban, and rural communities.

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Introduction

In an effort to reinvigorate a national discussion and move toward a more sustainable and integrated approach to urban Extension, a group of mid-level administrators working in metropolitan areas across the United States began meeting in late 2013. This group is called the National Urban Extension Leaders (NUEL). NUEL's steering committee prepared *A National Framework for Urban Extension*, a report for the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP). In October 2015, ECOP approved NUEL as a director/administrator-approved group of Extension employees who cooperate in advancing the strategic importance and long-term value of urban Extension activities by being relevant locally, responsive statewide, and recognized nationally. Advancing urban Extension is now one of ECOP's top priorities (Extension Committee on Organizational Policy, 2015; National Urban Extension Leaders, 2015).

Although there are many similarities in Extension's work across all geographic settings, dynamic situations in cities and large metropolitan areas present unique challenges and opportunities as Extension extends a history of innovation. Rural and urban communities are interdependent (Dabson, 2007; Davoudi & Stead, 2002; Lichter & Brown, 2014), necessitating a synchronized flow of Extension's work along the urban–rural continuum. To embrace effective urban Extension models and approaches, the Cooperative Extension System need not abandon its historic rural agendas.

Capitalizing on the extensive resource network of the nationwide land-grant university system, Extension must become better equipped to efficiently and effectively address complex urban priorities. In this article, we summarize relevant national trends and their overarching implications; suggest, against a backdrop of historical context, emerging opportunities and recommendations related to urban Extension; and issue a call to action. For the purpose of this article, the terms *urban*, *metropolitan*, and *city* are used interchangeably to refer to densely populated areas; no consistent parameters for population density have been established with regard to urban Extension.

Assessment of National Trends and Their Overarching Implications

Through an informal review of diverse resources from academia, industry, and government, the NUEL steering committee, of which we are part, assessed national trends and identified three primary shifts influencing Extension's work in urban communities. These are shifts in demographic characteristics, community conditions, and urban-suburban-rural interdependencies.

Demographics—America's Urbanization

In the 100 years since the passage of the Smith-Lever Act, the distribution of the U.S. population has dramatically changed, with an overwhelming majority of the population now living in and around metropolitan centers. Today, more than 80% of the country's population lives in urban or metropolitan areas, and projections indicate that this percentage will continue to grow (U.S. Census, 2016a, 2016c, 2016d; U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA] Economic Research Service [ERS], 2015). If Extension is to achieve a level of success in the 21st century similar to its 20th-century accomplishments, it must have an impactful presence in cities and metropolitan areas.

This shift in the physical location of the United States' population has been accompanied by a change in demographics of the population. In 2012 the U.S. Census Bureau announced that the national demographic

projections for the coming few decades indicated that the United States will have an older and more diverse population (U.S. Census Bureau Public Information Office, 2012). A high degree of ethnic and racial diversity enriches and challenges metropolitan communities (Farrell & Lee, 2011; Graham, Munniksma, & Juvonen, 2014; Meissner & Vertovec, 2015). Extension can view both the benefits and difficulties of this circumstance as opportunities for engagement.

Community Conditions—What Is Unique About Cities?

As the population of the United States moved to metropolitan areas, so did many of the most pressing national societal challenges. Cities and metropolitan areas are a mixture of cultures, attitudes, norms, and beliefs that have woven together to create a distinctive culture for each city or metropolitan area. Urban challenges are enormously complex with no simple solutions (Beaulieu & Cordes, 2014; Boyer, 1996; Harriman & Daugherty, 1992; National Extension Urban Task Force, 1996). The complexities of metropolitan issues usually affect multiple entities, are multijurisdictional, and are often politically influenced. Additionally, residents in these areas often elect the bulk of the state and federal legislators. Metropolitan areas frequently have multiple governmental service providers and a large number of nonprofit organizations providing information and services. These groups can act as partners with or competitors to Extension. The complex sociopolitical landscape, intensity of issues, and competition from other service providers necessitate a more relevant Extension engagement model in metropolitan areas (Reed, Swanson, & Schlutt, 2015).

Urban-Suburban-Rural Interdependencies

Urban and rural populations in the United States are connected and interdependent. Complex issues do not stop at rural county lines or city boundaries (Henning, Buchholz, Steele, & Ramaswamy, 2014; USDA ERS, 2015). Metropolitan and rural areas share common social issues such as poverty and hunger, housing and homelessness, migration and population shifts, and public safety and health (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016b). Well-functioning cities and suburbs and a healthy and sustainable rural economy are needed for shared success in the United States (Schwartz, 2015). A robust urban Extension presence should contribute to building strong connectivity among urban, suburban, and rural communities.

Four Areas of Historical Development and Opportunity for Urban Extension

In addition to examining external trends, the NUEL steering committee analyzed urban Extension by conducting a review of historical documents and literature. Details about the resultant literature database for metropolitan Extension are available at <http://metroextension.wsu.edu/literature-database>, and a collection of historical urban Extension documents is archived at <http://cityextension.osu.edu/library>. On the basis of this analysis, we detail in the subsections herein historical contexts, emerging opportunities, and recommendations related to the following four themes:

- positioning—how Extension is communicated and where it is situated at the national, state, regional, county, and city levels;
- programs—how Extension addresses the multitude of issues and priorities in cities;
- personnel—how Extension attracts, develops, retains, and structures competent talent; and

- partnerships—how Extension collaborates to leverage resources for collective impact.

Positioning

Positioning the role and value of Extension is critical for communicating at the national, state, regional, county, and city levels (Ruemenapp, 2017).

- Extension in densely populated areas is referred to as urban, metropolitan, or city Extension. With urban Extension, there is no consistent term or designation of the size of a city or region. Consistent terminology can be complicated by regional contexts.
- Extension operates in city or regional centers through traditional county operations or through shared partnered offices in diverse city neighborhoods.
- Several studies have indicated that urban populations traditionally have low awareness of Extension, use of Extension resources, and participation in Extension programs. Historically, Extension has been perceived as rural, with an agrarian focus that has consequently left many urbanites unaware of Extension's existence. Urbanites with some knowledge of Extension are often skeptical that Extension has the expertise or commitment to apply its resources toward playing important roles in cities (Christenson & Warner, 1985; Jacob, Willtis, & Crider, 1991; Warner, Christenson, Dillman, & Salant, 1996).
- The disparity in awareness of and support for Extension in cities affects funding streams (Henning et al., 2014; Raison, 2014).

Programs

As communities have changed due to expansion and shifts in populations, so has Extension programming. In the last half century, Extension has diversified its educational programming portfolio in many ways to respond to the needs of people living in urban areas (Beaulieu & Cordes, 2014; Christenson & Warner, 1985; Gould, Steele, & Woodrum, 2014; Schaefer, Huegel, & Mazzotti, 1992; Webster & Ingram, 2007).

- Program delivery methods and techniques must vary widely to account for the rich urban tapestry of diversity and commonalities found in metropolitan centers (Fehlis, 1992). The ability to effectively make adjustments to ensure programmatic relevancy and effective delivery will determine the future of Extension. Programs need to be targeted to key issues and audiences and planned for visible impact (Rasmussen, 1989).
- Extension programming needs to continue to be grounded in research-based resources as well as community and resident needs. The adoption of emerging technologies offers opportunities for Extension to educate and connect with broader audiences (Dromgoole & Boleman, 2006; Mastel, 2014; Robideau & Santl, 2011).
- Applied research and engaged scholarship are integral to urban Extension. Engaged scholarship has been defined by a number of groups and individuals. A group of research universities gathered to renew the civic mission of higher education and produced the report *New Times Demand New Scholarship II*. The report describes engaged scholarship as research that partners university scholarly resources with those in the

public and private sectors to enrich knowledge, address and help solve critical societal issues, and contribute to the public good (Stanton, 2012).

- Serving the needs of large metropolitan areas requires an approach to content and delivery that differs from the approach required for more rural communities. Currently, the majority of the curricula, delivery methods, and programming offered in cities and metropolitan areas is adapted from rural experiences and not uniquely developed for an urban audience (Western Extension Directors Association Urban Task Force, 2010). Although some materials and delivery methods adapt well, others do not. Urban audiences may have difficulty relating in meaningful ways to examples in teaching materials that were not designed from an urban perspective (Argabright, McGuire, & King, 2012; Borich, 2001; Gould et al., 2014; Krofta & Panshin, 1989; Webster & Ingram, 2007).
- In the metropolitan policy arena, there is demand for access to university-based engaged scholarship and applied research to inform decision making. In the absence of university engagement, metropolitan areas must rely on private sector consultancies for input into policy processes.
- As Extension explores program, project, and product solutions, subject-matter centers can add capacity to traditional Extension offices (Gaolach, Kern, & Sanders, 2017).
- Although there are promising practices with urban Extension work, best practices are not yet identified. More research and scholarly activity is required to build on programs documented through decades of national urban Extension conference publications, *Journal of Extension* articles, special reports on urban Extension, and urban Extension abstracts in proceedings from conferences of Joint Council of Extension Professionals organizations.

Personnel

Extension faculty and staff working in metropolitan areas need the same set of core competencies as Extension professionals in other geographic settings. However, because of the unique community conditions previously described, these individuals and teams must have additional skills and attributes to effectively address the needs of metropolitan constituents (Fehlis, 1992; Fox, 2017; National Extension Urban Task Force, 1996; Webster & Ingram, 2007; Western Extension Directors Association Urban Task Force, 2010).

- Due to the magnitude of diversity in metropolitan areas, cultural competence is essential for all personnel. Although this is an expectation throughout Extension, the scope in urban areas intensifies the degree to which personnel must apply related competencies (Krofta & Panshin, 1989; Webster & Ingram, 2007).
- With more diversified funding portfolios, personnel must invest more time and expertise in sourcing and managing multiple resources on various timelines beyond county, state, and federal fiscal cycles (Krofta & Panshin, 1989). Although many Extension professionals are content experts first and program managers second, in the city, the need for Extension is so vast that many become more engaged in capacity building and management.
- In the city, numerous public and private organizations compete for resources and audiences. This situation often creates an environment in which Extension competes with organizations that invest in talent

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