

Rethinking Service: Visual Arts at the Land-Grant University and in Extension Programming

Abstract

In 2014, land-grant institutions observed the centenary of the Smith-Lever Act, which established the Cooperative Extension program. Traditionally, Cooperative Extension has engaged in and disseminated findings from research in areas such as agricultural sciences and public policy, but rarely the visual arts, despite the prevalence of visual arts departments at land-grant institutions. Faculty in the Department of Visual Arts at North Dakota State University (NDSU) desired to know whether there was potential for collaboration with NDSU Extension. This article addresses findings from the resulting survey-based study and the implications of those findings.

Keywords: [visual arts](#), [Cooperative Extension](#), [outreach](#), [university collaboration](#)

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Introduction

In May 2014, land-grant institutions across the country observed the centenary of the Smith-Lever Act, the federal legislation that established the Cooperative Extension Service in the United States. The creation of the Cooperative Extension Service instilled public outreach as a core mission of land-grant colleges and universities, in addition to the research and teaching that all higher education institutions engage in (Marcus, 2015; Rasmussen, 2002). Realized in the form of noncredit programs, community engagement fostered by the service and the county agent system allowed land-grant institutions to address public needs with college and university resources.

At the time Congress established the Cooperative Extension Service, more than 50% of the U.S. population lived in rural areas and a third of the labor force worked in farming (U.S. Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture, n.d.). As a result, Cooperative Extension programming focused on agricultural and mechanical sciences. Since 1914, however, farm productivity has dramatically increased, and fewer than 2% of Americans work as farmers (Dimitri et al., 2005). Nevertheless, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2016), 19% of Americans live in rural areas, and through a robust network of county offices and specialist locations, Extension continues to provide rural communities with resources to support and enhance life and industry. The

scope of Extension activities is broad and connects an extensive array of university-generated knowledge to state populations. Home economics, public policy, mechanical arts, and agricultural sciences represent a few of the traditional disciplinary foci (Rasmussen, 2002).

The visual arts, however, are not generally associated with the public outreach mission of the land-grant institution or Extension, despite the prevalence of visual arts departments at land-grant institutions and the history of arts programming in rural areas sponsored by land-grant universities. Yet for many visual arts faculty, the focus on public engagement, public issues, and technical problem solving characteristic of the land-grant mission aptly resonates with contemporary aims of arts instruction and scholarship. In recognition of the changing needs of a 21st-century economy, many arts academics are promoting the application and role of visual arts in a broader range of technical and professional fields, including communications, sociology, and education.

More recently, a few state Extension services have themselves begun to advocate for and integrate arts programming as a focus of their efforts to serve rural communities. Kentucky and Wisconsin, for example, have initiated fine arts Extension activities aimed at improving quality of life in rural regions suffering steep declines in population (Allen, Bowker, Stamper, Owusu-Amankwah, & Davis, 2014; Barrett, 2013). These state Extension services recognize that the stimulating, culturally rich environment created through arts programs adds value to rural communities, improves quality of life for residents, and may address the mission of Extension in a similar manner to other disciplines.

Yet whereas contemporary offerings such as Kentucky's county-specific fine arts Extension programming or Wisconsin's Putting Culture Back into Agriculture project represent an important step in integrating arts into the public service of the land-grant mission, they are discrete initiatives; they do not represent a systemic connecting or partnering between visual arts teaching and research and Extension channels.

Formal and robust partnerships between visual arts departments and Extension services have great potential to benefit both parties. With its networks of offices and agents throughout states, financial resources secured at the federal level, and access to local communities, Extension offers visual arts departments opportunities to realize programming and extend research in ways currently unsupported by a limited and highly competitive grant environment. As well, visual arts projects and outreach activities offer new ways to support communities and enhance quality of life in areas with dwindling populations, particularly for families, children, and younger adults.

The process of generating a sustainable partnership between a visual arts department and a state Extension service, however, is highly dependent on the individual state and its population, specific needs, and Extension resources. To develop a mutually beneficial collaboration, planners must be informed about stakeholder views regarding the relevance and feasibility of such a partnership and their ideas as to what constitutes effective programming.

The study described in this article involved the gathering of preliminary data needed to develop effective initiatives and was based on three overarching goals: to assess perceptions regarding the alignment of the visual arts and the land-grant mission, to assess potential willingness toward collaboration between the North Dakota State University (NDSU) Department of Visual Arts and North Dakota's Extension professionals, and to collect suggestions for how such collaboration could initially take shape. Another goal for the study was to establish a reproducible method that could be used by other land-grant universities as a first step in developing connections between visual arts departments and Extension. At present, the available literature does not describe methods for assessing the potential for collaboration between land-grant university visual arts departments and Extension,

nor is there available research that discusses possible first steps in initiating such partnerships.

Institutional Context

NDSU is the second largest university in North Dakota, with just under 15,000 students, and is located in Fargo, the state's largest city (with close to 110,000 residents). Prior to the oil boom in the western reaches of the state, North Dakota was an agricultural state in decline, with populations dwindling to around 672,000 in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). NDSU, located on the eastern border with Minnesota, lies close to 8 hr from the far northwestern border with Montana, making NDSU Extension's centers and experiment stations critical to the dissemination of current research throughout the state. The university celebrates its history as a land-grant institution and heavily markets itself as a student-focused public-service research university. The land-grant mission to engage and serve the people of North Dakota is emphasized throughout the university, and buildings with names such as Morrill Hall hark back to its legacy as a university founded in service.

Interestingly, NDSU has a history of integrating arts activities into Cooperative Extension work; agriculture professor Alfred Arvold developed the Little Country Theatre in 1914 to use drama to bring diverse populations together and improve rural livelihood by immersing residents in the arts. Writing about the generation of the theatre initiative, Arvold argued, "It is little use to teach better methods of crop production and distribution among country folk unless something fundamental is done along social lines to help them find themselves and brightening their personal lives" ("Bringing the Drama Back," 1916, p. 14). Arvold, through his activities related to the Little Country Theatre, furthered a legacy of community outreach that offers an important model for the NDSU Department of Visual Arts.

Yet the 21st-century land-grant institution differs greatly from that of Arvold's time. Universities, particularly NDSU, are much larger, with layers of administration and other divisions that limit the scope of what one department or faculty member can do to engage the university community. Moreover, the contemporary relevance and meaning of the land-grant institution to a geographically diverse student body and faculty outside of agricultural colleges is not always clear.

As a unit in NDSU, the Department of Visual Arts has developed initiatives to rethink how we advance the land-grant mission in our instruction and research activities. In recent semesters, we have initiated new collaborations with other departments, such as landscape architecture and public history, to provide students with new settings in which to apply skills learned in their studio classes. One such partnership matched second-semester photography students with students from a landscape architecture environmental planning studio to work together on planning initiatives in the Bakken oil region in western North Dakota (Kirkwood & Fischer, 2016).

Our beliefs regarding the compatibility between visual arts departments and the land-grant mission, however, build off of our own perceptions and experiences. To assess how our department can best engage both the outreach mission of the land-grant university and the Cooperative Extension network, we needed to understand how members of the NDSU community, particularly agents in the state's 54 Extension offices, perceive the visual arts and the potential for further connection with our department.

Survey Methods, Results, and Discussion

In fall 2014, I designed and implemented a survey for NDSU Extension professionals, faculty, staff, and students that addressed participants' perceptions of the Department of Visual Arts and what we do, knowledge about the land-grant mission, and understanding of the role of the Department of Visual Arts in the implementation of that

mission. I also asked Extension agents about potential collaborations between our department and their offices. The questions were designed to gather information about stakeholder views of our department and ways our department could more actively participate in advancing the university's land-grant mission by working with Extension. By surveying Extension professionals, faculty, staff, and students, I ensured that all members of our university system could offer input into the discussion and that our department, thereby, could assess feasibility of potential collaborations in a more accurate manner. The discussion herein addresses responses from all groups but gives emphasis to the responses of Extension professionals.

I developed separate questionnaires for each group. Each questionnaire consisted of a mix of multiple-choice, multiple-selection, and text-entry questions; contained the same set of 12 core questions; and included a set of questions specific to the relevant participant group. All surveys were distributed via the official university electronic mailing lists and were completed online. I chose this method to maximize participation among all groups, including individuals who did not live near the NDSU main campus in Fargo. Participation was voluntary for all groups. Table 1 provides data on numbers of respondents.

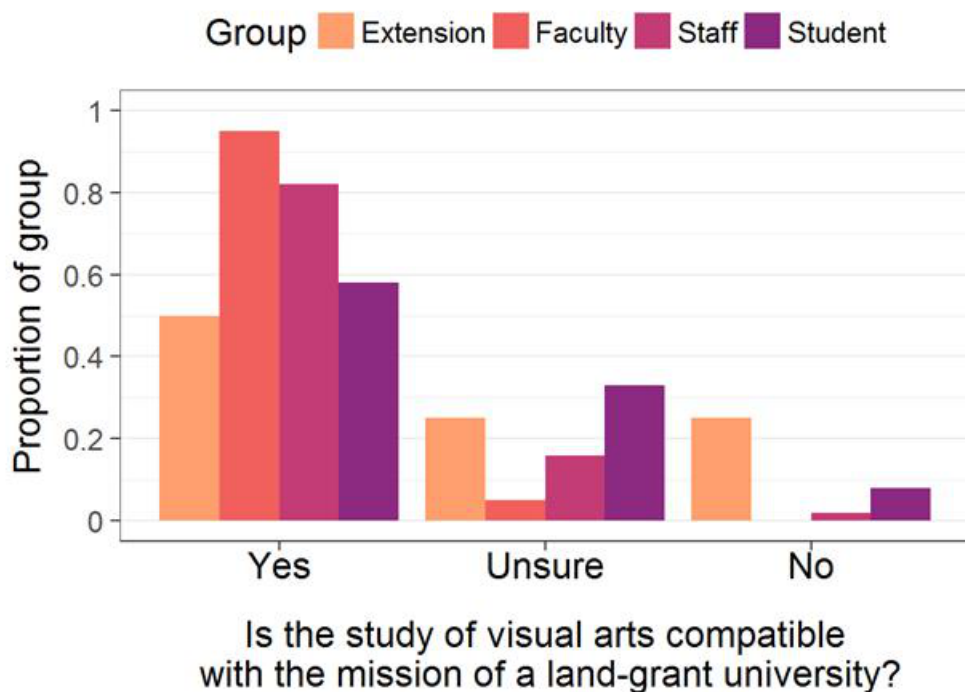
Table 1.
North Dakota State University Survey Groups and
Participation Numbers

Group	Number of survey respondents
Extension agents	40
Faculty	92
Staff	57
Students	250

All questionnaires asked participants directly whether they felt that the study of visual arts is compatible with the mission of the land-grant institution (Figure 1). With the exception of Extension professionals, a majority of respondents in each sampled group indicated that they believed the study of visual arts *is* compatible with the land-grant mission. Fifty percent of Extension professionals said that the study of visual arts is compatible with the land-grant mission. Only 23 out of a total of 439 respondents believed that the study of visual arts is not compatible with the land-grant mission. A quarter of Extension professionals indicated that they were unsure.

Figure 1.

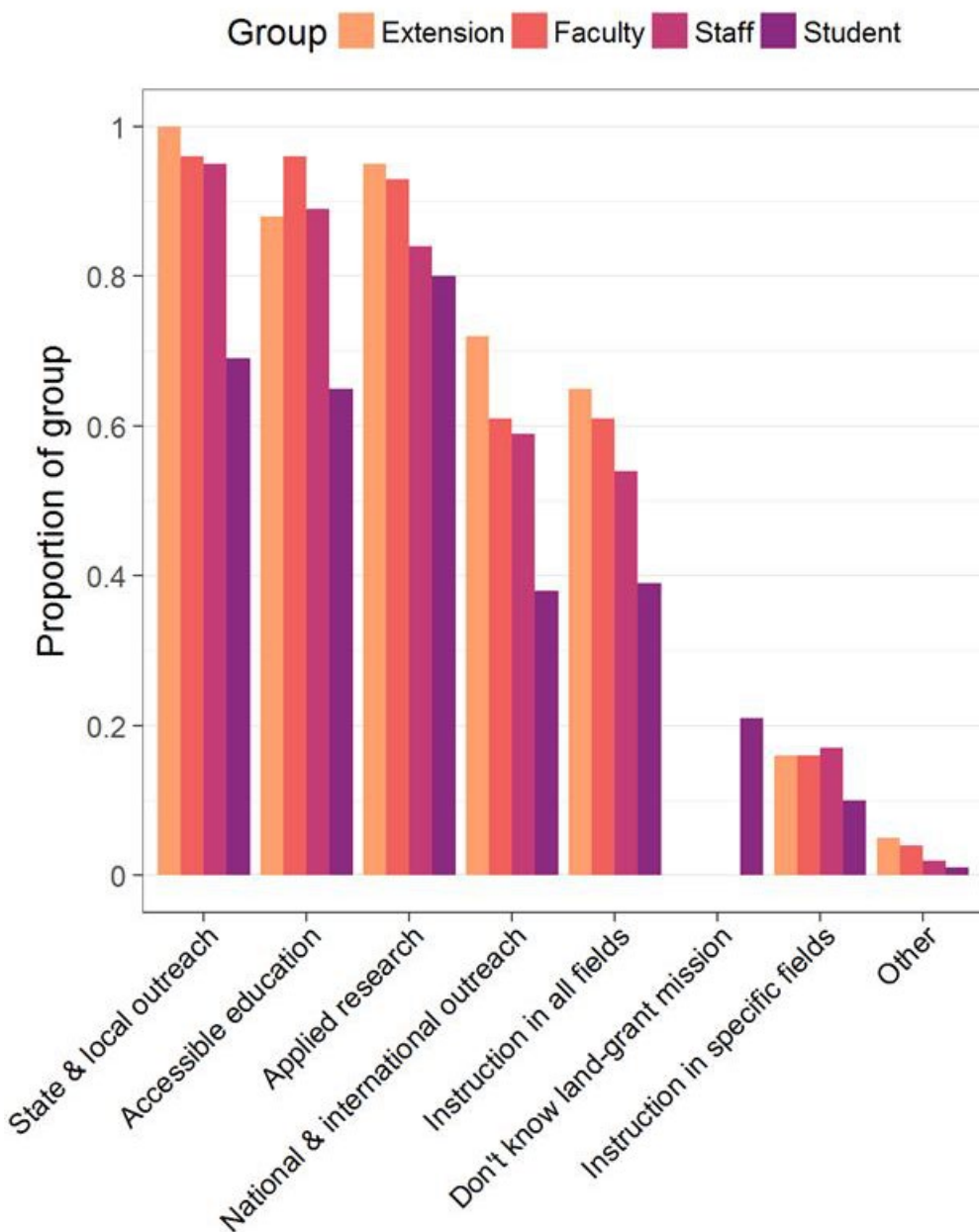
Distribution of Responses Across Surveyed Groups Regarding Compatibility of the Study of Visual Arts with the Land-Grant Mission



The questionnaires also assessed how participants understood the land-grant mission (Figure 2). Respondents were provided with phrases drawn from publications of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities as well as a text-entry platform for submitting other answers. Interestingly, out of all the provided answers, "instruction in specific fields" received the fewest selections from participants. This suggests that the perception that land-grant institutions are only for instruction and research in agriculture, life sciences, and home economics may not be widely held. Yet whereas most respondents did not emphasize the importance of specific fields to the land-grant mission, they did identify with other key phrases routinely cited in discussions of land-grant universities and their role as tertiary institutions. Among all surveyed groups, the options of outreach to the state/local community and applied research were most frequently selected as concepts associated with the land-grant mission. "State and local outreach" scored highly among all groups, with selections from all Extension survey participants and nearly 100% of faculty respondents. These data suggest that although participants do not perceive disciplinary restrictions in the land-grant mission, they do identify with duties of the land-grant university as outlined in the original Morrill Act.

Figure 2.

Proportions of Each Group That Selected Various Phrases as Representative of the Land-Grant Mission



Phrases associated with the activities and mission of land-grant universities

In addition to assessing perceptions of visual arts study and the land-grant institution, the questionnaires also asked participants how the NDSU Department of Visual Arts could better uphold the mission of the land-grant college. All responses were text-entry and differed greatly across the surveyed groups. Extension respondents indicated a desire that communication of visual arts research and knowledge to the rest of the state be improved. Two comments from the surveyed Extension professionals summarize the nature of responses to this question: (a) "This is one more avenue of research and education NDSU can deliver out to its citizens. This is no different than delivering programs on nutrition or animal health" and (b) "Visual arts are a social asset that make living in a community desirable." Among all surveyed groups, however, participants were clear and consistent in their recommendations: Visual arts education provides valuable services to the university, state, and local

communities, and there needs to be better delivery of those services.

The Extension questionnaire asked additional questions aimed at assessing the potential for future collaborations between our department and the Extension professionals' network. Participants were provided a list of suggestions for pairing Department of Visual Arts activities with county Extension office activities as well a text-entry option for offering other suggestions (Table 2). Respondents expressed greatest support for two of the provided options: "public programming such as artists' talks, lectures, and/or arts instruction" and "site-specific art projects that involve county Extension offices or specialist locations and surrounding community." More than half of the respondents selected both. Further, in written responses, Extension professionals repeatedly emphasized a desire for more integration of visual arts research and 4-H programming, as summarized by comments such as this: "Bring the talents of the college to the communities in North Dakota through 4-H, schools, and adult workshops. There is a shortage of art and design technique throughout the state in our school systems and overall population. The traditional arts that homemakers spent past generations on keeping alive are starting to decline in the next generation."

Table 2.

North Dakota State University Extension Professionals' Selection of Activities Representing Potential Collaboration with the Department of Visual Arts

Activity	Responses	
	f	%
Public programming such as artists' talks, lectures, and/or arts instruction	36	90
Site-specific art projects that involve county Extension offices or specialist locations and surrounding community	34	85
Course visits to county Extension offices or specialist locations	19	48
Long-term research projects by visual arts faculty at county Extension offices or specialist locations and/or surrounding community	13	32
Other	10	25

As noted, a majority of survey respondents believed that applied research is a key component of the land-grant mission. The Extension, faculty, and staff surveys asked participants whether they believed visual arts faculty were extending their research to state/local communities (Figure 3). Responses differed among the survey groups. Only one of the 40 Extension respondents answered yes, whereas 13 said no and 26 said they were unsure. These results may indicate a communication issue specific to our department, but they also suggest that conversations with Extension professionals about how visual arts research is or could be shared with the community may be an important prelude to developing new collaborative initiatives. Also of note, half of the Extension respondents had the perspective that visual arts research is as meaningful as other areas of research at land-grant universities (Figure 4), suggesting a potential willingness to engage with visual arts departments to support dissemination of such research.

Figure 3.

Perceptions of North Dakota State University Extension Professionals, Faculty, and Staff Regarding Existing Extension of Visual Arts Research to State and Local Communities

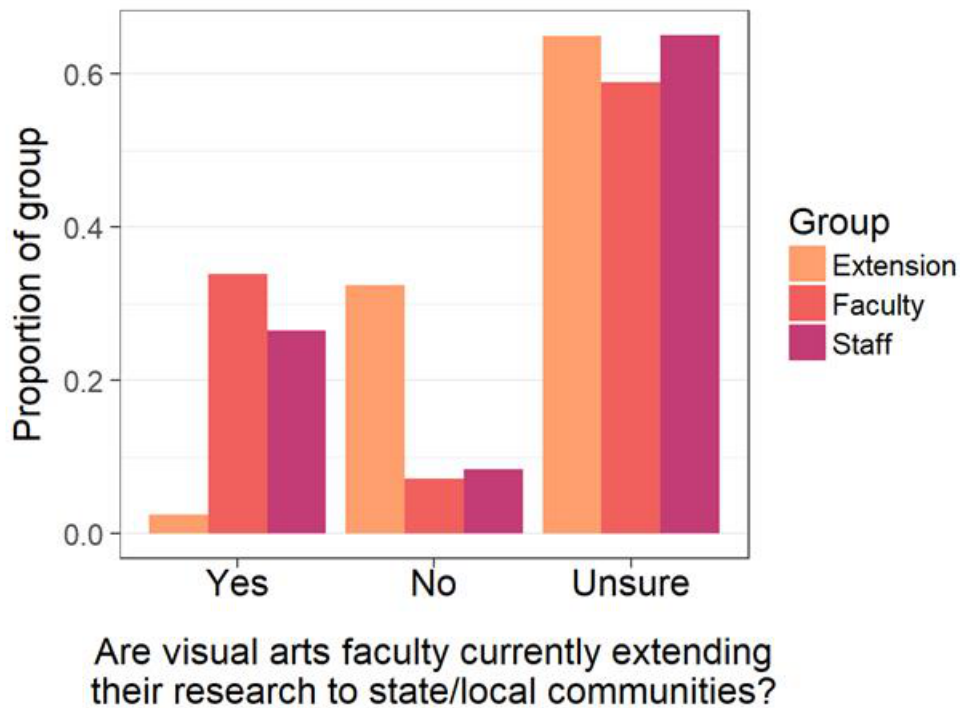
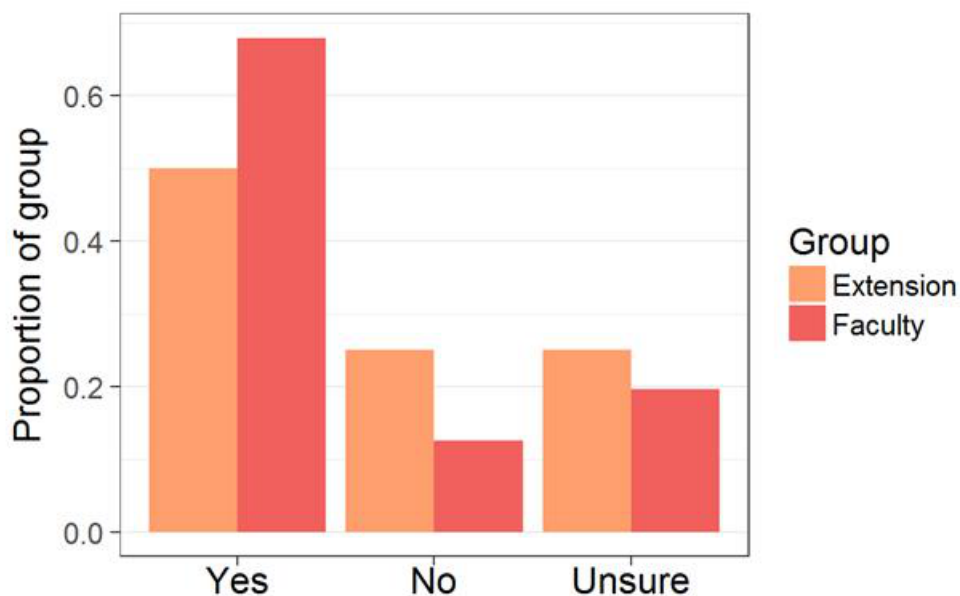


Figure 4.

Perceptions of North Dakota State University Extension Professionals and Faculty Regarding the Importance of Visual Arts Research at Land-Grant Universities



Is visual arts research as meaningful as other types of research conducted at land-grant universities?

Conclusion

The study reported here addressed three goals: to assess perceptions regarding the alignment of the visual arts and the land-grant mission, to assess potential willingness toward collaboration between the NDSU Department of Visual Arts and North Dakota's Extension professionals, and to collect suggestions for how such collaboration could take shape. The resulting survey data offer a few key points for reflection and direction for next steps in developing collaborative programming. Before discussing these points, however, I would like to emphasize that these results represent the views of university and Extension communities in North Dakota. Researchers in other states who wish to develop partnerships between visual arts departments and Extension professionals may want to conduct similar studies to assess the best options for stakeholders in their states.

First, the findings demonstrate that there is broad support for a robust visual arts presence in land-grant institutions and Extension. Respondents indicated not only that they believe that the study of visual arts is compatible with the land-grant mission but also that they would like to have visual arts assume a broader role and integration in nonhumanities fields and Extension programming. Further, in their capacity as connective agents between the state university and state populations, Extension respondents perceived a need for arts research in their communities. As a next step, these findings can support requests to administrators for resources—supplies, faculty/staff time, and travel costs—to develop programs that extend visual arts research into university, local, and state communities.

Second, nearly all participants cited "outreach" as a key commitment of all land-grant institution activities and offered concrete examples of ways visual arts faculty can further engage university, state, and local communities using Extension networks. Their responses suggest that connecting to Extension offices should be part of a visual arts department's core activities and that developing outreach activities should form the basis of any partnership with Extension. In their responses, Extension professionals offered actionable suggestions for outreach

opportunities within existing programming. For example, Extension respondents suggested that our visual arts faculty could work with 4-H programs and leaders to improve and expand visual arts components of youth development endeavors. Working with existing programs is a practical and effective next step for building long-term partnerships between a visual arts department and Extension.

Finally, whereas Extension survey participants showed near unanimous enthusiasm for establishing partnerships between our department and their offices and openness to a breadth of activities and research, they also were largely unsure as to whether visual arts could support the land-grant mission or whether NDSU Department of Visual Arts faculty were already extending their research to state and local communities. This finding suggests that it may be beneficial for visual arts departments to communicate directly with Extension offices about what they do in their research and outreach activities. Extension professionals also may wish to reach out to visual arts faculty to share information about their arts-related work and needs. Initiating these basic conversations may help both parties learn about existing areas of overlap and potential for future collaboration. For example, after completing my research, I communicated with the director of one of the state's Research Extension Centers about sharing with residents in the area an exhibition of photographs taken in the region. He was enthusiastic about the idea, offered a temporary space at the center, and helped publicize the exhibition opening through local producer and community electronic mailing lists.

The Morrill Act of 1862 did not outline a clear role for the visual arts in the land-grant university objectives, and planners of visual arts initiatives have only begun to access and use Extension networks in a substantial manner. There are many limitations to realizing a mutually beneficial partnership between visual arts departments and Extension offices, but the data presented here show that the foundation for such partnerships—a perceived need, aligned objectives, and willingness to participate—is present and that such partnerships are actionable.

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge Devan Allen McGranahan for his assistance in producing the graphs in this article.

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