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A New Regional Model for Increasing Extension's Capacity to Reach Metropolitan Audiences

Abstract

Six western Extension organizations founded the Western Center for Metropolitan Extension and Research (WCMER) to increase the internal capacity of Extension to address metropolitan issues and elevate the value of Extension to external metropolitan audiences. In this article, we present a case study of WCMER. We describe the inception of the center and results of an analysis of its functionality. Those results include findings related to the advisory board's ability to build social capital and leverage power networks, WCMER's originating within a culture of innovation and being modeled after other innovative centers, and the concurrent formation of WCMER and the National Urban Extension Leaders network, which propelled WCMER to a national level.

Keywords: social capital, urban, cities, innovation, applied research

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Introduction

When Extension was founded in 1914, most Americans lived in rural settings. Now the majority of Americans live in urban communities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c; U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 2015), and this trend toward urbanization is expected to continue for the foreseeable future (National Urban Extension Leaders, 2015). Many articles have explored the role of Extension in urban

communities (Argabright, McGuire, & King, 2012; Borich, 2001; Gould, Steele, & Woodrum, 2014; Krofta & Panshin, 1989; National Extension Urban Task Force, 1996; Webster & Ingram, 2007). The issues and opportunities facing Extension in urban communities, such as demographic changes, multicultural and multijurisdictional communities, and urban–rural interdependencies, also have been well documented in journal articles (Fox & Peterson, 2017; Fox, Ruemenapp, Proden, & Gaolach, 2017; Gaolach, Kern, & Sanders, 2017) and organizational position statements (e.g., National Urban Extension Leaders, 2015) and by the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (2015, 2016).

In the early 2000s, Extension in the urban West faced significant obstacles. Multnomah County, one of the four counties making up the Portland, Oregon, metropolitan area, ended its relationship with Oregon State University. In the metropolitan Seattle area, Washington State University (WSU) Extension in King County was beginning a decade-long battle to retain county funding (Gaolach, Aitken, & Gromko, 2018). In response to these challenges, the Western Extension Directors Association (WEDA) convened a series of task groups to better understand the issues, needs, and opportunities associated with Extension's role in urban communities in the West (Table 1) (see also http://extension.oregonstate.edu/weda/weda-committees).

Table 1.

Task Forces Established by the Western Extension Directors Association (WEDA)

Year	Task force name	Task force purpose(s)	Western states with Extension programs represented
2007	Western Extension Urban Think Tank	Identify the characteristics of the urban West and explore one or more conceptual models for urban Extension work.	Colorado, Nevada, Utah, Washington
2009	WEDA Urban Extension Committee	Review and report on the research base for operationalizing the model for urban Extension presented in "Extension in the Urban West." Determine best practices for working with 25- to 34-year-olds in urban settings (i.e., what technologies and practices should be employed). Recommend tools and evaluation methodologies to ensure that Extension's contributions to and impact on joint projects with urban partners are recognized and understood. Recommend ways Extension personnel in urban areas across the West might better support and learn from each other (e.g.,	California, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington

		quarterly phone conferences, webinars for sharing successes, conference on urban Extension in the West). Identify potential partners for urban Extension. Recommend how to advance the urban agenda in the West.	
2012	WEDA Urban Task Group	Explore what a regional urban center would look like and how to operationalize such a center.	Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and a WEDA Extension director

The western states have unique characteristics: The West is the most urbanized region in the United States, western city leaders face challenges of growth management instead of revitalization or decay, and western cities were built during the age of the automobile. In addition, vast areas of land in the West are owned by the federal government (e.g., up to 87% of Nevada), and the pattern of development in the West resembles a network of city–states that drive social and economic growth in the region (Western Extension Directors Association, 2008). In response to the growing urbanization of western states, the Western Extension Urban Think Tank recommended in 2008 that WEDA explore the formation of a regional center. Four years later, WEDA created the WEDA Urban Task Group to carry out that recommendation.

The case study reported here illustrates the organizational factors that influenced the formation of the Western Center for Metropolitan Extension and Research (WCMER) and the activities the center pursues. To situate the case, we first present the inception of WCMER, followed by a case description. Throughout this article, we use the terms *urban*, *metropolitan*, and *city* interchangeably to refer to spaces of high density that may or may not be organized within a formal system of government.

Establishing a Regional Urban Center

The WEDA Urban Task Group, comprising representatives from nine western land-grant Extension organizations (Figure 1), was tasked with identifying how best to support Extension's focus on urban issues and determining an organizational structure for a regional center. Western research centers tend to mimic other research centers to obtain public approval and credibility (R. W. Scott, 2008). Therefore, WEDA Urban Task Group members considered the following three organizational options: a coalition of Extension programs, a network, or a more formalized center with a clear mandate, staffing structure, and leadership body. To learn about the organization and activities of existing centers, the Urban Task Group met with staff of three innovative centers in WSU Extension: The William D. Ruckelshaus Center, the Division of Governmental Studies and Services, and the emerging Metropolitan Center for Applied Research and Extension (see Gaolach et al., 2018, for information about how such centers are organized and operate). The Urban Task Group noted three key attributes of these centers:

- a small, nimble staff that emphasizes project management over program delivery;

- an emphasis on creating project teams and drawing expertise from home institutions; and

- an ongoing effort to engage new stakeholders.

Drawing from their research and a shared culture of innovation and ownership, the Urban Task Group recommended a formalized, center-based organizational structure that included a center director, an advisory board with representation from member states, and WEDA oversight (Figure 1). WSU Extension volunteered to host the center and provide a half-time director and some administrative support. Six Extension programs made financial contributions toward the operations of the center, and the advisory board was populated by representatives from those six institutions (Table 2).

Figure 1.

Organizational Chart for the Start-Up and Fully Operational Phases of the Western Center for Metropolitan Extension and Research (WCMER)
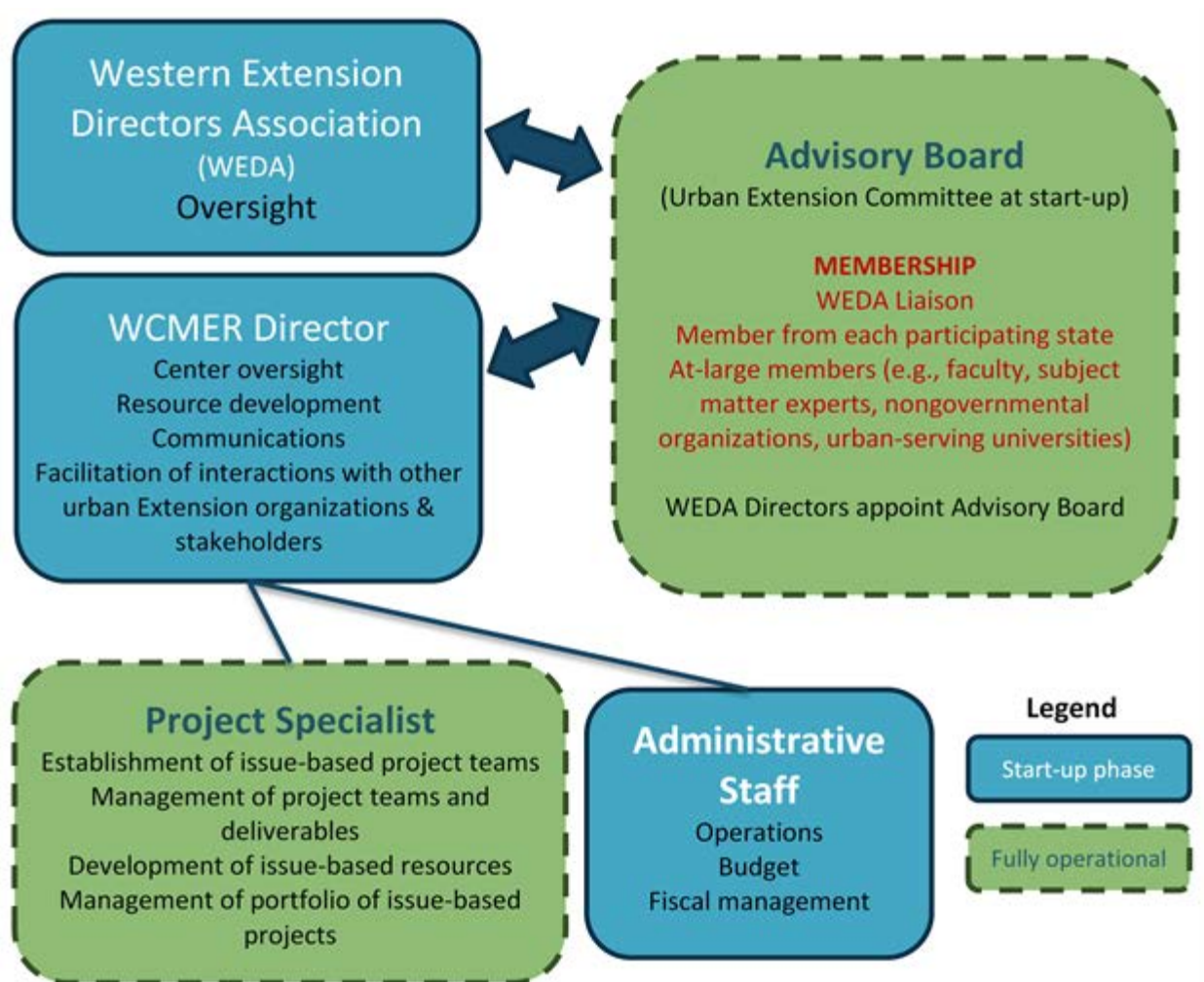

Table 2.

Western Center for Metropolitan Extension and Research (WCMER) Founding Extension Programs and Initial Advisory Board Members

Founding WCMER institution	Initial WCMER advisory board member(s)
University of Alaska Fairbanks	DeShana York, Urban Extension Director[a]
University of California	Fe Moncloa, 4-H Youth Development Advisor, Santa Clara County
	Keith Nathaniel, 4-H Youth Development Advisor and County Director, Los Angeles County
Colorado State University	Russell Collins, Denver County Extension Director
University of Idaho	Marsha Lockard, Family and Consumer Sciences Educator and County Chair, Ada County, retired
Oregon State University	Patrick Proden, Metro Regional Administrator
Washington State University	Robert McDaniel, Extension Community and Economic Development Unit Director, retired

[a]DeShana York did not participate in any of the WEDA Urban Task Group meetings but was the first advisory board member assigned to represent University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Analysis

Using the WCMER as the unit of analysis, our team collected data by using the following qualitative methods: (a) conducting semistructured key informant interviews with advisory board members and directors of Extension for member states, (b) analyzing the social network of advisory board members, and (c) examining artifacts such as meeting notes, reports to WEDA, and presentation abstracts.

We completed semistructured interviews with seven of the eight advisory board members and four of the seven state Extension directors. We interviewed two additional contacts, who were chosen due to their familiarity and working relationship with WCMER in the Extension arena. In total, 13 key informant interviews were conducted. Two identified informants were not interviewed due to nonresponse, and one declined to participate in the interview process.

Interview questions were designed to elicit responses about these key informants' engagement with the WCMER, their overall view of how it functions, and their perspectives about its future. The interviews were conducted via phone, recorded, and subsequently transcribed for analysis. We analyzed responses from the interviewees using qualitative data analysis software and a process of coding and mind-mapping to identify reoccurring themes and categories.

Building Social Networks

Findings from the qualitative interviews indicate that a social network has developed among WCMER advisory

board members. At its core, a social network is simply the set of relationships that exist across a group of people (Kadushin, 2012). Previous research has shown that social networks provide members a variety of advantages. For example, as Haythornthwaite (1996) discussed, close connections among network members can result in an open exchange of information among the members. This exchange of ideas and information leads to members' becoming better informed. Additionally, members are introduced to new connections and opportunities they otherwise may not have known about. Overall, the strength of a network is dependent on the interactions and ties members have with one another (Kadushin, 2012).

To better understand the strength of WCMER's network and the associated individual relationships, we conducted a brief follow-up survey with the members. Our intent was to collect additional data for a social network analysis (SNA) map. The unique benefit of SNA is that it allows for the examination of relational data in a way that many other analysis techniques do not (J. Scott, 2017) by providing a visualization of relationships among individuals and quantifying the relationships that make up the network.

The results of the SNA indicate that there are varying degrees of closeness among the advisory board members (Figure 2). When examining the centrality of the network, we found that half of the network's members have high degrees of centrality. Although the fifth advisory board member (AB #5) has the highest degree of centrality, as documented by the dark collaboration lines coming out of and entering the AB #5 node in the figure, the fourth, first, and eighth advisory board members (AB #4, AB #1, and AB #8) also demonstrate high degrees of centrality. The seventh and second advisory board members (AB #7 and AB #2) have midrange levels of centrality. Finally, the map shows that the closeness of the sixth member (AB #6) and third member (AB #3) is minimal compared to that of the rest of the network. This circumstance can be explained, in part, by AB #6's being a new member of the board.

Figure 2.

Social Network Analysis Map of Western Center for Metropolitan Extension and Research Advisory Board Members
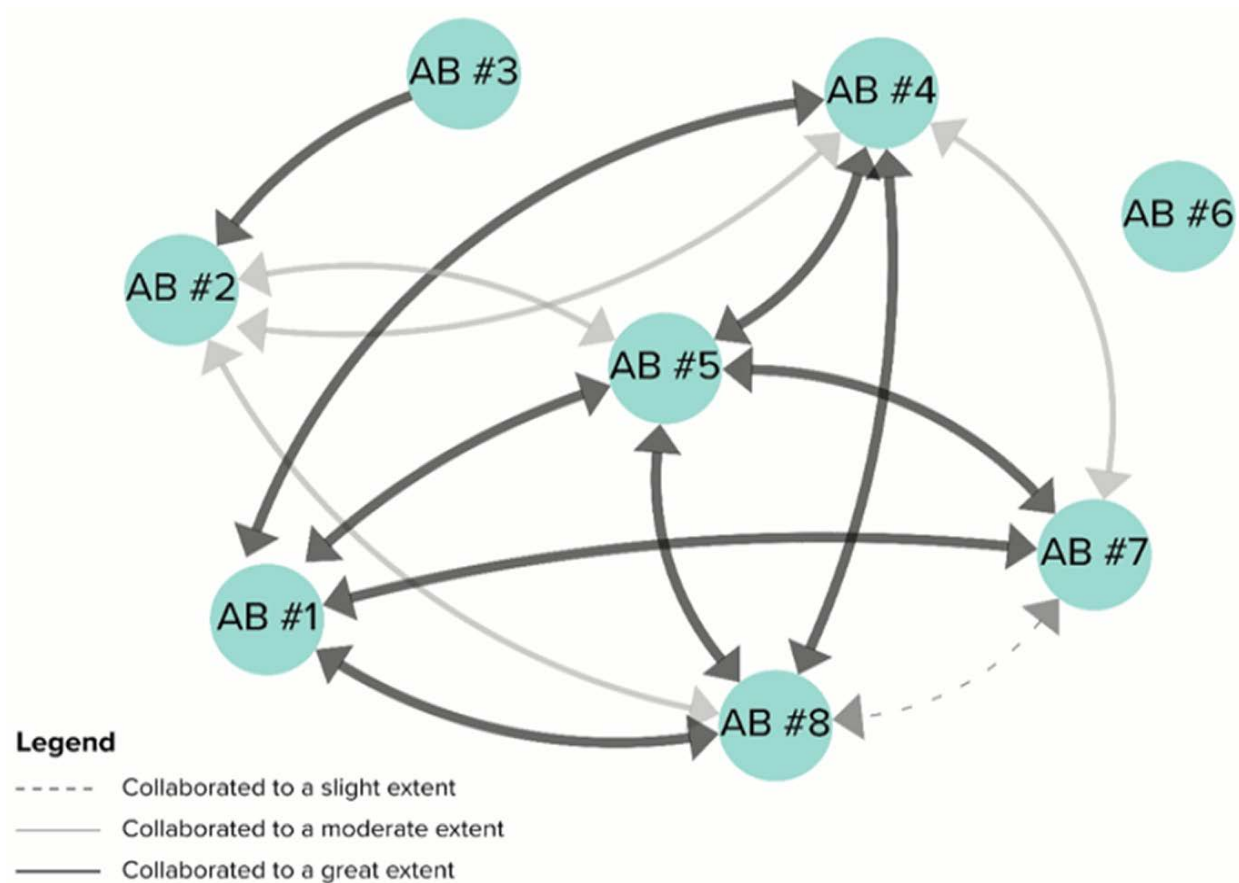
To strengthen the WCMER network, it is recommended that the advisory board members with higher degrees of centrality find ways to better engage with those members whose closeness is limited. One way to do so is by increasing communication with those who are not as closely connected. Although the results are not displayed herein, the questionnaire also asked advisory board members to indicate their levels of communication. Those members with the highest degrees of centrality (AB #5, AB #4, AB #1, and AB #8) also had had levels of communication throughout the preceding year that were higher than those of the other members. However, some of this communication occurred monthly, not weekly or more often. This finding demonstrates that although maintaining communication on a regular basis is important, the advisory board members do not need to be in weekly contact with one another to maintain levels of connectedness.

A Culture of Innovation

Those involved in developing the WCMER identified the need to promote a culture of innovation among metropolitan Extension faculty to support a paradigm shift from a classic county-office model to an urban-center model. A classic county-office model is generally defined as being funded primarily by the county, having long-tenured agents who deliver educational programs to constituents, and being slower to respond to emerging issues. In contrast, the urban-center model is defined as consisting of agents who respond nimbly to community issues by focusing on short-term projects that are contract or grant funded (Collins & Gaolach, 2018; Gaolach et al., 2017). To support metropolitan Extension professionals, WCMER leadership identified two focus areas for the center:

- applied research to be implemented for the purpose of identifying promising practices in metropolitan centers and emerging metropolitan issues around which land-grant universities can contribute to decision making and

policy development and

- professional development to be implemented for the purposes of (a) addressing the unique combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for meeting the needs of metropolitan constituents and (b) developing and sustaining a network of Extension faculty and staff working in Western metropolitan areas.

Applied Research

Each WCMER applied research project identifies next steps Extension programs can take to advance an issue under study. For example, results of an applied research project may serve as the basis for new long-term programming at the state or local level, trainings, or the development of policy briefs. Applied research projects also may identify professional development needs and opportunities for urban Extension professionals and subsequently inform the development of WCMER's professional development activities.

To leverage existing expertise among its members and catalyze applied research, WCMER leadership established a fellowship program. WCMER's first fellow conducted a comprehensive literature review across several literature indexes, using nested Boolean searches, to find reports and articles relevant to metropolitan Extension published between 2000 and 2016. The fellow identified nearly 2,000 unique citations by using various combinations of the terms *cooperative*, *extension*, *urban*, *metro*, and *university* (Ruemenapp & Gaolach, n.d.). This literature review informed two additional fellowships:

- an identification of core competencies needed for Extension work in the city that produced a peer-reviewed journal article (Fox, 2017b) and two national presentations and contributed to the professional development curriculum Leadership in the City (Fox, 2017a) and

- an identification of opportunities for Extension to engage broadly in policy work through prepolicy development, policy development, and policy execution.

Professional Development

Building on the aforementioned culture of innovation concept, WCMER implemented three professional development strategies: webinars showcasing exemplary metropolitan Extension models and programs, conferences on ways to translate research into policy, and interstate staff exchanges. Data regarding participation in the activities associated with these strategies are shown in Table 3.

Table 3.
Western Center for Metropolitan Extension and Research Professional Development
Strategies: Numbers of Activities and Numbers and Locations of Participants

Strategy (number of activities)	Participants (state abbreviations)
Webinars	555 (representing 40 states from all U.S. regions)
Metropolitan extension	254 (AK, AZ, CA, CO, CT, DC, FL, GA, ID, KY, ME, MA, MI, MN, MT, NJ, NY, NC, OH, OK, OR, PA, TX, UT, VA, WA, WV, WI)

models (9)	
Metropolitan programs (4)	
Policy conferences (2)	54 (AK, AZ, CA, CO, FL, ID, IN, LA, NJ, NC, OH, OR, TN, WA)
Staff exchanges (5)	7 (CA, CO, MO, NJ, NM, OH, WA)

To implement the first professional development strategy, WCMER hosted 13 webinars on topics ranging from Colorado State University's hot shot model to Ohio State University's Extension in the City and Building from the Traditional Base approaches to addressing metropolitan Extension. Webinars were presented live to allow for question-and-answer sessions with the presenters and were recorded and posted on the WCMER website for later viewing. Webinars were open to all Extension professionals across the country.

For the second strategy, translation of research into policy, WCMER convened conferences titled "Extension as Urban Policy Advisors" in Seattle and Sacramento to provide Extension professionals with the tools to engage in policy work. Informing policy, whether at the local, regional, or state level, is one of the key responsibilities of Extension faculty. In metropolitan centers, elected officials welcome unbiased information for decision making.

The third strategy, interstate staff exchanges, was created to address the challenge of most western states' having only one or two metropolitan centers, leaving Extension staff with limited opportunities to learn from intrastate peers. Staff exchanges support in-depth peer learning among member institutions. A staff exchange between Colorado State University's Denver Extension office and WSU helped shape the hot shots model (Collins & Gaolach, 2018). Other staff exchanges revolved around urban 4-H clubs, ripple effects mapping evaluations, and best practices in local foods and urban agriculture endeavors. Inspired by the success of these staff exchanges, non-WCMER member University of Missouri sent a team of urban managers to Colorado State University to learn about urban programming and the hot shots model.

Growing a National Movement

Although WCMER's origin was regional, urban Extension is now the focus of a national movement. WCMER leadership has shared the center's framework and experience across the country through presentations at national and regional professional society meetings, including three presentations at Joint Council of Extension Professionals leadership conferences (2015 and 2016) and six presentations at the two most recent National Urban Extension conferences. Additionally, WCMER leadership successfully competed to host the first National Urban Extension conference in the West in 22 years, slated for May 2019.

Concurrently to the WCMER's formation, the National Urban Extension Leaders network (NUEL) was developing. NUEL had not benefited from the formative work that supported WCMER's development (see Table 1); however, WCMER advisory board members were able to provide early thought and organizational support to NUEL and represented the Western Region on the NUEL steering committee. Advisory board members also leveraged WCMER activities to encourage other Extension programs across the West to participate in NUEL and the urban Extension movement.

To support Extension's paradigm shift to an urban model, WCMER leadership joined existing public and Extension

networks to maintain an ear to the ground regarding urban issues both in the West and in other parts of the United States, including by engaging with two National Association of Counties caucuses—the Large Urban County Caucus and the Western Interstate Region—to help position WCMER to address issues relevant to their members. Additionally, WCMER leadership was central to the development of the Well Connected Communities initiative established between Extension and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, initiated in 2017.

One important function of WCMER is to help incubate, test, and evaluate new metropolitan Extension models. WCMER members contributed to the formation of WSU Extension's Metropolitan Center for Applied Research and Extension (Gaolach et al., 2018; Gaolach et al., 2017) and Colorado State University's hot shot model in Denver (Collins & Gaolach, 2018) and provided consultation to the University of Alaska Fairbanks in 2017 during reorganization discussion in response to significant state budget reductions.

Conclusion

Institutional pressures, an innovation mind-set within WEDA and the WEDA Urban Task Group, and favorable economic conditions facilitated the formation of the WCMER. In the absence of existing metropolitan-based research and Extension centers, the WEDA Urban Task Group modeled the WCMER after reputable WSU centers. Modeling the WCMER after those WSU centers provided it with early credibility with member institutions. The early success of WCMER, in turn, supported the formation of NUEL.

For a new business to succeed, there must be a shared culture of innovation and ownership in its start-up phase (Gudmundson, Burk Tower, & Hartman, 2003). These attributes are present among WCMER members and have contributed greatly to the center's success. Relational connections between the WCMER advisory board members and director, and their social networks with national metropolitan organizations, have led to the transmission of innovative ideas and programs. The hot shot model emerged from the group and was launched within a brief period. Founding members of the center continue to serve in advisory roles, and this sustained participation has cultivated shared ownership among members. However, the relational connections among WCMER members reveal that there is an opportunity to invest social capital among actors to strengthen and expand these networks. This investment, especially with new center members, will ensure future success and sustainability of WCMER.

The case study presented here illustrates the organizational factors that influenced WCMER's inception and its programs and practices. WCMER can serve as a model for other regions that aim to increase the internal capacity of Extension organizations to address metropolitan issues by

- building social capital among a core, guiding coalition with a shared vision and purpose that is supported by institutional leadership;

- identifying and engaging with existing power networks;

- leveraging Extension's unique assets in a competitive urban landscape to create and support innovative engagement models and activities; and

- capitalizing on the urban extension movement and engaging with NUEL through its regional caucus network for support.

Acknowledgments

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