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Informing Innovations Through Deeper Insight on Strategic Priorities and Expansive Ideas

Abstract

Recent national Extension initiatives and reports provide insight into innovation trends and issues. In response to questions from participants in eXtension Impact Collaborative events, we adapted two business frameworks to provide deeper insight about innovation. The adapted frameworks are helpful for identifying strategic areas of focus for innovation and prompting expanded thinking about potential types of innovation.

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National Initiatives and Reports

When eXtension Foundation was refocused on innovation and professional development by Extension directors and administrators in 2014, it began an innovation fellowship and project grant program and sponsored execution of the _NMC Technology Outlook for Cooperative Extension 2016–2021: A Horizon Project Sector Report_ (Freeman, Adams Becker, & Cummins, 2016). In 2016, eXtension began developing a unique program, the Impact Collaborative, to engage Extension professionals in innovating ideas and accelerating the development of those ideas into projects toward implementation for local impact.

The work we report on here was informed by the _Extension Task Force Innovation Report_ (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy [ECOP], 2016) and the _Technology and Innovation Ad Hoc Committee Report_ (ECOP, 2017). Although innovation has been happening throughout the history of Extension (Gould, Steele, & Woodrum, 2014), these reports indicate that the pace of change and the complex dynamics of today require us to respond differently to meet diverse local needs. Additionally, other observations have reinforced the primary role of organizational leadership and culture in catalyzing local innovation (Argabright, McGuire, & King, 2012; Franz & Cox, 2012; Meyer, Boyce, & Meyer, 2015). Inspired to encourage fresh responses from Extension, we at

eXtension Foundation adapted two business frameworks to provide deeper insight regarding the roles of strategic prioritizing and expanded thinking in achieving innovations.

Identifying Strategic Areas of Focus

During Impact Collaborative activities, we at eXtension Foundation foster insight regarding priorities for innovation using an adaptation of a classic strategic framework published by Igor Ansoff (1957). We translated Ansoff's business language of *products* and *markets* to Extension language of *programs/projects* and *audiences*. We added numbers representing both the cycle of ideas moving from status quo to breakthrough and the degree of innovation, which is the degree of difficulty for implementation. Our adapted framework is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1.
Extension-Oriented Innovation Matrix
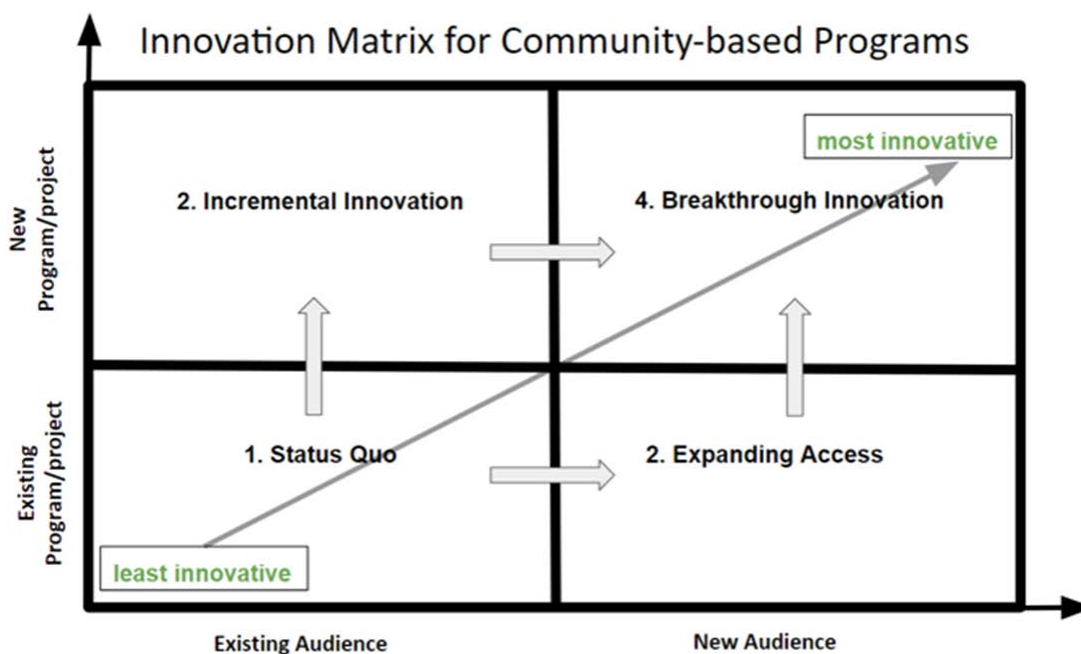
The matrix we developed is useful for exploring what needs to be different to move innovations into other quadrants. We have observed that the most desired innovation quadrants are those labeled with the number 2. Explanations of the quadrants are as follows:

- *Lower left quadrant—Existing program/project, existing audience.* Ideas in this quadrant relate to improving existing programs/projects to meet existing audience needs. Examples are updating existing program content, strengthening assessment, and reducing costs. These types of innovations are relatively straightforward to implement because they do not challenge existing assumptions, ways of working, or resources.

- *Lower right quadrant—Existing program/project, new audience.* Ideas associated with circumstances in which programs/projects are well known but the needs of new audiences are not yet fully understood align with this quadrant. Partnerships and alliances to serve new audiences are often solutions in this quadrant.

- *Upper left quadrant—New program/project, existing audience.* This quadrant describes ideas stemming from situations in which existing audiences express the need for new solutions and desired features of those solutions. Serving an existing audience feels familiar and usually involves straightforward implementation, but

executing ideas represented by this quadrant often requires the use of additional resources to meet needs through new types of products or services.

- *Upper right quadrant—New program/project, new audience.* Ideas in this quadrant involve new combinations that have not been tried before. The intended audiences may not anticipate or express their needs until they see the solution. This quadrant represents new, experimental territory and the most difficult kinds of innovations to implement.

Expanding the Scope of Innovation

To help foster more expansive ideas related to Extension professionals' pursuit of innovation, we adapted the work of innovation specialists at Deloitte Consulting LLP, who published *Ten Types of Innovation: The Discipline of Building Breakthroughs* (Keeley, Pikkel, Quinn, & Walters, 2013). This listing of types of innovation, discussed in depth below, has helped participants in Impact Collaborative activities consider new areas for innovation.

How You Generate Funding

Tapping nontraditional sources of funding is a type of innovation. Two examples of funding sources at the national level are the Well Connected Communities initiative funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation through a partnership with 4-H Council and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Pesticide Safety Training Funds Award, received by eXtension on behalf of all pesticide safety educators. An emerging state-based model is Michigan State University's effort to charge for service through health-care insurance agencies.

How You Connect with Others and Create Value

Partnering with non-Extension and nonuniversity organizations to use their processes, technologies, offerings, channels, and brands is a type of innovation. Examples are a collaboration through which the University of Idaho and Apple, Inc., deliver the Swift Coding curriculum; an endeavor by Utah State University, 4-H Council, and Google to develop computer science clubs; and an initiative resulting from Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive grant funding that connects hospitals and clinics to provide vegetable prescription programs through farmers' markets, corner markets, mobile truck markets, and health departments.

How You Organize and Align Your Talent and Organizational Functions to Create Value

Aligning talent in ways that also attracts new talent to the organization can help create productive and appealing working environments. Examples are Oregon State University's placing nutrition educators at local food banks and Purdue University's hiring graduating students in temporary positions in Extension prior to graduation.

How You Use Unique-to-Your-Organization Methods to Do Your Work

Developing unique processes and methods is a type of innovation. Examples include adaptation of the data jam model for use in tagging digital content at the University of Wisconsin and implementation of Innovate Extension events in lieu of traditional conferences at The Ohio State University.

How You Develop Distinguishing Features of Your Programs/Projects

Innovations in design and delivery in Extension include development of the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy's rapid response protocol for responding to emerging issues; new models for 4-H programming, such as makerspaces; and new models of partnership and collaboration used in urban Extension.

How You Create Complementary Programs, Projects, and Services

Extension professionals can bundle offerings to create a robust and scalable system of programs, projects, and/or services. Examples include providing online modules that aggregate to a certificate credential and establishing complementary offerings of the master gardener program, such as junior master gardener, victory gardening, and master naturalist programs.

How You Support and Amplify the Value of Your Offerings

Innovations can make products and services easier to try, use, and enjoy. Combining digital content and customer relationship management, as has occurred in Penn State's Atlas project, is an example.

How You Deliver Your Offerings

Innovations can occur in the ways you connect your offerings with your audience. Examples of innovative delivery methods are using digital games to teach pesticide safety at Pennsylvania State University and conducting virtual local foods field trips at North Carolina State University.

How You Represent Your Offerings

Brand innovations help ensure that customers recognize, remember, and prefer your offerings. Purdue University's "Extension Does" branding is an example.

How You Foster Compelling Interactions

Understanding audience aspirations can lead to meaningful connections. An emerging example from Oregon State University is a noncredit transcript that documents the lifetime learning activities of Extension volunteers.

Conclusion

We adapted two tools from the business world to help Extension professionals make informed project selections and generate diverse ideas as part of eXtension Impact Collaborative endeavors. Participants use these tools to identify strategic growth areas and explore different types of innovation to expand the scope of what is possible in the early stages of ideation. Our intent with this commentary is to encourage others throughout Extension to think both strategically and expansively in their efforts to achieve innovation.

members, and eXtension innovation fellows and project participants.

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