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Hot Shots and Project-Based Extension: Setting a National Model by Reinventing Extension in Urban Areas

Abstract

Colorado State University's Denver County Extension office is transforming the urban Extension landscape through a deliberate shift from traditional Extension programming toward a more project-based approach. In collaboration with the Western Center for Metropolitan Extension and Research, Denver County Extension developed the hot shot model to conduct applied research and special projects via project-based Extension in Denver, innovating how Extension operates and is viewed in urban communities. This approach couples staffing flexibility with expanded subject matter expertise, allowing local Extension to respond nimbly to stakeholder priorities while brokering the research and educational expertise of the university with the community.

Keywords: [project based](#), [innovative staffing](#), [metropolitan](#), [fee for service](#), [Extension continuum](#)

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Introduction

The Colorado State University (CSU) Denver County Extension office faces the challenge common to most urban Extension offices: how to best meet the needs of a large and diverse population in a rapidly changing and competitive environment (Fox & Peterson, 2017; Fox, Ruemenapp, Proden, & Gaolach, 2017; Ruemenapp, 2017; Western Extension Directors Association, 2008). Denver Extension presently offers urbanized versions of traditional, or legacy, Extension programs, including 4-H, urban agriculture, master gardener, nutrition education, and community development. Concurrently, Denver Extension has developed a new hot shot model that complements a deliberate philosophical shift toward a more project-based focus. This shift allows Extension to meet emerging needs of interest to stakeholders and decision makers without burdening the already taxed capacity of existing faculty/staff. The hot shot model couples staffing flexibility with expanded subject matter expertise, aligning local Extension offices with urban decision makers and stakeholders and allowing local Extension to further deliver on the land-grant mission of linking communities to the research and educational expertise offered by universities (Gaolach, Aitken, & Gromko, 2018; Gaolach, Kern, & Sanders, 2017).

The Model

Projects and Programs

To understand the hot shot model, it is important to first distinguish programs from projects. Programs operate on a long-term basis, spanning years or decades (e.g., master gardener programs); they are focused on the expert model of engagement and generally rely on continuous, county-based funding. Conversely, projects are shorter term in nature, typically lasting months instead of years; they are client centered and customized for the stakeholder and are funded on a full-cost-recovery basis. Figure 1 provides further information about differences between programs and projects.

Figure 1.
The Program-Based to Project-Based Extension Continuum



The hot shot model does not call for abandoning Extension's history of program-based education in favor of project-based activities. Rather, it suggests an opportunity to augment Extension's existing portfolio and generate new revenue and encourages new partnerships. It helps position local Extension in new environments relevant to key decision makers and stakeholders, helping positively shift the image of Extension in urban settings.

Staffing the Model

Hot shots are individuals deployed to implement all or part of these short-term projects. Because Extension office faculty and staff are frequently working at full capacity managing their traditional Extension programs, hot shots are often external partners hired on a temporary basis and vetted for their subject matter, or project management, expertise or skills. This staffing approach capitalizes on a unique feature of metropolitan areas: a large labor force of individuals who are comfortable, or even prefer, working on an as-needed basis. This labor

pool consists of professionals in all career stages, including retired Extension faculty and university experts.

Whether they are hired as part-time employees or contactors, hot shots perform a specific scope of work, either alone or as part of a team of hot shots or Extension staff. Oversight of the hot shots is provided by the local Extension office and is based on the needs of the project and capacity of the office. The hot shot model is not intended to sustain new programs that require ongoing programmatic and personnel support. A hot shot's work concludes when the project is completed.

Implementing the Model: Early Successes

Two early implementations of the model illustrate its potential. One involved research on local foods consumption and the other cottage foods training.

Local Foods Research

Denver County Extension was selected as one of three organizations to establish a baseline measurement to document a shift in consumption of locally produced food in Denver. Extension was hired to conduct a national case study to identify the top 10 cities/states that have achieved a local food shift. Denver County Extension did not have the capacity to conduct this particular research, so a hot shot was identified to supplement Extension's expertise for the project and was hired as a temporary, hourly employee. The resulting research informed the City of Denver's Office of Economic Development and helped shape the future food vision for the city.

Cottage Foods Training

Denver County Extension responded to a community-based request to offer cottage foods training to complement a new Denver ordinance that allowed homegrown produce to be sold at residential front-yard farm stands. Denver Extension did not offer cottage foods training at the time, so a recently retired CSU Extension family and consumer sciences expert, certified to provide cottage foods training, was hired. This hot shot conducted the cottage foods training for 30 participants and generated more than adequate cost recovery for all personnel and program costs. Although this was a small-scale project, it was of great importance to stakeholders and illustrated how Extension can respond nimbly to local needs, further aligning Extension with key partner organizations in the city.

How to Replicate the Model

The project-based hot shot model can be replicated in a local county Extension office. Successful replication would require the following elements:

- a mind-set shift toward recognition of the value of short-term projects to stakeholders and an entrepreneurial attitude regarding actively seeking opportunities and partnerships that lead to projects;
- the ability to create a project budget that covers all the costs of implementing the project, including personnel, supplies, travel, and university overhead, along with the understanding that a project should be undertaken only if adequate funding exists;
- the ability to create a detailed scope of work with the stakeholder that provides a roadmap for the hot shot;

- the ability to pay a temporary worker or contractor within the policies of the university;
- a system of review to ensure that the hot shot is working to the standards set by Extension (although the hot shot is temporary in nature, his or her work is still identified as Extension work); and
- the ability to build relationships with multiple hot shots to ensure that Extension has a bench of expertise available should new projects and priorities arise.

A completed project should produce a relationship with the stakeholder based on trust and delivery and should increase the likelihood that the stakeholder will request additional contract work in the future. It is important to seek feedback from a stakeholder about Extension's role in a project and to follow up with the stakeholder at a later time to maintain Extension's top-of-the-mind appeal.

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