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Engage the Future: The New Extension Learners

Abstract

Extension has the opportunity to establish itself as a leader in meeting the changing needs of a new generation of learners. With more than a century's experience in developing and delivering successful programs in communities, Extension can equally succeed in leading the land-grant university system in expanding involvement in five critical areas of education today: degree completion and learner success, community and economic development, engagement of underserved populations, engagement of the newest members of the workforce, and promotion of experiential learning. This commentary identifies and reflects the collective views of 26 administrators who participated in an event designed to vision Extension's expanding role in the 21st century.

Keywords: [noncredit](#), [skill development](#), [lifelong learning](#), [nontraditional learners](#), [millennials](#)

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Introduction

As times change, Extension is asked periodically to explore its future in order to stay relevant (Bull, Cote, Warner, & McKinnie, 2004; Reed, Swanson, & Schlutt, 2015). Higher education is facing a revolution in both credit and noncredit educational offerings to meet the evolving needs of learners who no longer fit the traditional stereotype of an on-campus college student. There is now more emphasis on lifelong learning and provision of relevant educational content across multiple learning platforms and formats. The challenge is for universities to become more effective drivers of economic viability if they are to remain relevant, successful, and politically viable.

The makeup of higher education learners has dramatically changed (King & Boehlje, 2013). A majority of learners are now going to school part time, working full time, and/or caring for dependents (The Institute for

Women's Policy Research, 2018). Only about 15% are now the so-called traditional students straight from high school (Pelletier, 2010). The remaining 85% (nontraditional) are diverse, are active in the workforce, lack postsecondary credentials, have families to support, and are determined to pursue further knowledge and skills while balancing life, work, and education (Soares, 2013). It is also true that nontraditional learners represent a challenge to universities because they comprise a mix of adult learners (over 25 years old), commuters, low-income students, and part-time employees who study (as opposed to students who are employed) (Hittepole, 2016). They represent a great diversity of ethnicities, cultures, experiences, and goals (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2015). However, these are wage earners supporting themselves and their families and consciously pursuing knowledge and credentials that employers highly value and compensate for accordingly (Soares, 2013).

Beaton (2017) argued that for these learners, skill application and the ability to continually refine and develop new skills, as opposed to just completing a 4-year education, has become essential. Are universities poised to increase opportunities beyond traditional credit offerings, such as noncredit education via Extension-based programming, and would this directly address educational needs for applied skills and knowledge across such diverse lifelong learners? At the 2017 Western Extension Directors Association meeting in Kona, Hawaii, Extension administrators deliberated on opportunities and challenges associated with Extension's engagement in lifelong learning focused on building skills specifically for nontraditional learners. This deliberation occurred because the success of this group of learners will dramatically improve the economic viability of communities, states, island territories, and regions. We were among this group of administrators and represent their collective views herein.

Critical Areas of Education for Today's Learners

We identified five key areas for further consideration. Extension has the capacity to meet the needs of the audiences identified for each area.

Assisting with Degree Completion

As a contributing member of the academic enterprise, Extension should be more involved in learner success and degree completion. There are approximately 40 million learners nationwide with some college yet no bachelor's degree (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). Of students who go to community colleges, an average of only 30% go on to 4-year institutions, and of those, only 14% go on to graduate from 4-year institutions (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). What other learning options exist for all these learners? What is Extension's role in helping improve graduation rates so that local communities can benefit from citizens who have greater skill development? We in Extension should think outside traditional boundaries and reconsider our potential and power to help meet these needs in communities through stronger engagement with the student and learner experience.

Emphasizing Education in Community and Economic Development

Extension services have rich and trusted relationships with businesses, families, individuals, and local governments and the ability to form mutually beneficial partnerships. However, Extension must become nimble and adaptable, serving as a conduit for addressing new community needs. This scenario is synonymous with that of the small start-up retail business, restaurant, hotel, or product manufacturer that

can now vault above competitors simply by providing an excellent product or service and not relying solely on just a brand name. How can Extension evolve rapidly to provide business-enhancing educational and training services and grow to serve in even more significant roles for economic development?

Engaging Underserved Populations

Extension needs to accelerate efforts to increase diversity within the organization's ranks so that we can better serve diverse needs outside the organization. We continue to risk leaving underserved populations behind because we are not adequately aware, positioned, or equipped to serve these less visible clients. One concept is to strive to reach an 80/20 synergy to address social issues such as challenges in native communities and remaining barriers for women in leadership. In this scenario, 80% of our offerings would remain core programming and 20% would be customized for underserved groups.

Engaging Millennials

A critical group of current learners is millennials (those now in their late 20s to mid 30s). These learners are dynamic. For example, of those involved in one study, only 29% stated that they were engaged in their work, 21% had changed jobs over the preceding year, and 60% were open to entertaining other job opportunities (Adkins, 2016). Additionally, millennials are very optimistic, more ethnically and racially diverse than older generations, less religious, less likely to have served in the military, and on track to become the most educated generation in U.S. history (Council of Economic Advisers, Executive Office of the President of the United States, 2014). These data provide universities with an opportunity to affect economic vitality by engaging millennials in educational opportunities that better fit their lifestyles and desires. The demand for lifelong learning is high within this generation, and employers value the resourcefulness of millennials who can continually advance their own skill development through degree and nondegree approaches (Beaton, 2017). How can Extension be more attractive both as an employer and as an educational partner for younger generations? A challenge is that some sectors within Extension may be "stuck in their ways" and not willing to acknowledge generational differences or adopt new approaches to working with millennials.

Promoting Experiential Learning

Extension is well equipped to foster educational experiences within our organization as well as to support connections with local businesses and organizations. We can offer diverse experiential learning opportunities such as internships, applied research, leadership development, and community engagement to many audiences, including young entrepreneurs, college and community college students, professionals in need of advanced degrees, and individuals who may benefit from competency-based (skills) education. Although resource constraints often limit our participation, noninvolvement by Extension in experiential learning has negative community implications, such as a less prepared future workforce and an underserved student population

Supporting the Natural and Inclined Way Makers

The United States' future will be created by the current and successive generations of Americans. Future populations will not necessarily have the same cultural experiences and perspectives as current generations. If Extension intentionally and purposely supports learners in acquiring new skills and knowledge, we can help

provide lifelong experiences and training that will be useful to next-generation leaders and workforce members.

Food for Thought

Intentionally concentrating on supporting and rewarding disruptive innovation is not something higher education has done well in the past (Franz & Cox, 2012). Tancer (2014) described a process for new idea generation where ideas are either sustaining innovations or disruptive innovations. Sustaining innovations are ideas that maintain the growth and success of the core enterprise. Disruptive innovations, similar to ideas described by Christensen and Eyring (2011), focus on unrecognized potential that at some point surpasses the core enterprise in successfully providing value to customers (learners) never before thought of or currently overlooked. The more disruptive the ideas are, the more risk is involved, and, in many cases, greater is the potential for return as well as for pushback from defenders of the status quo (Franz & Cox, 2012).

The critical aspect of our collective efforts in Extension will come when identified segments of learners and their unique needs, wants, passions, and motivations are cross-linked with the new capabilities in education represented by innovation in technology and other pedagogical tools. We must begin to develop prototype solutions for the needs we identify for these learners and then continue to revise, revisit, rebuild, and retest where and when necessary. The overarching issues remain as questions that should motivate us for idea generation. Are our programs sustaining innovations or disruptive innovations? Are our universities at a precipice of unprecedented opportunity? Can Extension disrupt from within, or is a catalyst needed? Can we be the source of success and solutions related to larger issues than we have seen since the early days of our land-grant universities? What role does Extension play in the education of the lifelong learner, including nontraditional students embedded within each of our communities? These are all questions that should guide us as we consider the future of Extension and how we can meet the changing needs of new learners.

Taking the Next Strides Forward

To ensure action on these items, we encourage Extension professionals to take the following steps:

- Start having conversations with others in Extension as well as existing and new constituent communities about unmet but truly important needs Extension could address.
- Meet with campus leaders—those in leadership positions and thought leaders who have proven interest—to determine what they think could be useful outputs in education for citizens of their communities.
- Find ways to support, acknowledge, and reward individuals who are positive disrupters. These risk takers can make transformation happen only when it is (generally) safe to do so.
- Transform traditional Extension models to better demonstrate the philosophies of university engagement.

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