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Public Value and Partnerships: Critical Components of Extension's Future

Abstract

The future path of Extension will be heavily influenced by our willingness to engage in communities in ways that reframe who we are, what we do, and for whom we do it. The best opportunities lie in the areas of public value and partnerships. As Extension professionals, we must define our organization's most important public value, embrace the development of partnerships and coalitions, and make organizational decisions that support rather than stifle innovation. Success in these areas will increase Extension's visibility and value as a community asset.

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As a kid growing up in the Chicago suburbs, I had no idea that Extension existed. Extension does not have a visible presence in so many communities like the one I grew up in. There are literally millions of people who have no idea that Extension exists, and they are missing out.

We are living during a time when people have unprecedented access to information, and this circumstance makes it only more challenging for Extension to be viewed as the go-to knowledge resource (King, 2018). The future path of Extension will be heavily influenced by our willingness to engage in communities in ways that reframe who we are, what we do, and for whom we do it. I would argue that the best opportunities lie in the areas of public value and partnerships.

Public Value

In 1995, Harvard Professor Mark Moore argued that leaders of public organizations need to deeply consider three questions before committing to a course of action. Moore and Khagram (2004) articulated these questions as follows:

- What [is] the important public value the organization [seeks] to produce?
- What sources of legitimacy and support would be relied on to authorize the organization to take action and provide the resources necessary to sustain the effort to create that value?

- What operational capabilities (including new investments, innovations and alliances) would the organization rely on (or have to develop) to deliver the desired results? (p. 1)

In my mind, an ideal situation occurs when the organization is quite clear about the public value it seeks to produce and its sources of legitimacy and support so that the most time can be spent examining ways to best achieve the desired results. Extension has not yet achieved this ideal situation. I believe the legitimacy and support that has been provided to Extension by federal, state, and county governments is abundantly clear. As well, I have engaged in countless meetings, planning sessions, and retreats all focused on how best to achieve results. These are valuable endeavors—an essential part of decision making, as outlined by Moore (1995). However, there is a real opportunity for Extension to revisit the question of what public value we seek to produce.

In the urban Extension needs assessment that I led in Florida from 2016 to 2018, we asked county agents questions about Extension's niche. What makes Extension unique from the other public and private service providers that exist within the urban environment? What value do we offer the residents of our communities? Almost unanimously, the response focused on Extension's role as an unbiased source of research-based information. While true—Extension is a provider of research-based information—I question whether this is the niche we want to promote. First, it is my belief that this niche is an outdated notion given the increasing number of non-land-grant education institutions jumping into the extension and outreach arena with their own research. I expect this trend to continue if it proves to be profitable. Second, a brand based on being an unbiased provider of research-based information lacks flashiness and focus. It sounds academic, and unsurprisingly so given Extension's relationship with the land-grant university.

In 2004, Alberts, Wirth, Gilmore, Jones, and McWaters conducted a case study of University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Extension and concluded, "The public's awareness of IFAS/Extension and their belief that the information found there is the best information they can obtain at the lowest cost is key to Extension's success in the future" ("IFAS/Extension's Current Situation," para. 5). Part of their statement warrants repeating: the best information at the lowest cost. Truly, this can be Extension's niche and its contribution to creating public value, particularly if we outcompete the market not only in terms of monetary cost but also reduced time costs. What we have yet to determine is what type of information we can offer that meets these conditions.

A well-documented body of psychology research examines the paradox of choice. In short, good things happen when people have choices. They are more motivated and happier, except when too many choices are presented (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). Providing too many choices forces the brain to do more work processing multiple and sometimes increasingly complex options and to make many more value judgments. Lab studies have shown that participants experience more satisfaction and perform higher quality work when their choices are limited (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000).

How does this idea relate to Extension's public value? As an organization, we are victims of choice overload. We offer many high-quality programs backed by world-class research to a diverse set of audiences. Yet the very existence of so many quality efforts appears to create organizational paralysis and prevents us from clearly answering the question "What is the important public value Extension seeks to produce?" Moving forward, Extension must embrace the opportunity to define our most important public value and make organizational decisions accordingly.

Partnerships

I have argued that the best opportunities for Extension lie in two areas. The first was public value. The second is partnerships. There is no plausible future scenario in which Extension will be successful without forming partnerships. The needs are too great, the problems too complex, and Extension's resources too few for us to go it alone.

The change management literature gives us a couple of good reasons why partnerships will be so critical for Extension moving forward if we accept the premise that all public extension systems are designed to create positive change within communities. First, Rogers (2003) wrote of the need to collaborate with opinion leaders when diffusing innovations. In some places, the Extension agent is still a well-known member of the community. However, this simply is not true anymore for Extension everywhere. Developing partnerships with community opinion leaders is a good way to gain access to audiences that can be difficult to reach. For example, an agent in the Orlando, Florida, area has developed a relationship with a pastor whose church members are largely economically disadvantaged. The pastor uses the church's bus to transport members to relevant job training programs offered by Extension; his willingness to vouch for the importance of attending the programs provides Extension with the credibility to help an audience that was previously unserved. Extension needs more partnerships with opinion leaders like this one.

The second argument for forming partnerships comes from the business leadership literature. Kotter (1996) had this to say about leading change:

Because major change is so difficult to accomplish, a powerful force is required to sustain the process. No one individual, even a monarch-like CEO, is ever able to develop the right vision, communicate it to large numbers of people, eliminate all the key obstacles, generate short-term wins, lead and manage dozens of change projects, and anchor new approaches. . . . A strong guiding coalition is always needed—one with the right composition, level of trust, and shared objective. (pp. 51–52)

Although Kotter wrote of the role of guiding coalitions in creating change within an organization, I have seen evidence of the positive impacts that guiding coalitions constructed of like-minded partners can create within communities. Take, for example, the case of The Tampa Bay Watershed–Forest Working Group. This working group was created in 2006 by two innovative UF/IFAS Extension faculty, agent Robert Northrup and specialist Michael Andreu, and consists of representatives from local, state, and federal agencies whose common interest is forest sustainability. One of the group's early major accomplishments was the development of a comprehensive urban forest management plan for the city of Tampa, an early funder of the group's efforts. More recently, the group completed a third tree canopy and urban forest analysis for the city.

The Tampa Bay Watershed–Forest Working Group is notable not only because it was the first of its kind in Florida, but also because this coalition approach to doing Extension work has not rapidly diffused throughout the organization yet. There are several probable reasons for this situation, including the difficulty of making collective impact work fit within the traditional metrics used to measure performance in Extension. As an academically backed organization, Extension often operates on a similar promotion system as the rest of the university, which means that individual accomplishments are critical for professional advancement. As Kotter (1996) remarked, "Teams aren't promoted, individuals are . . ." (p. 56).

Real and significant change—this is what Extension is intended to bring to our communities. As an organization, we should worry less about the educational approach used to achieve that change and more about how to

support our agents and specialists when they discover ways to be successful. Moving forward, Extension must embrace engagement in and leadership of guiding coalitions as a core component of our organizational strategy so that this type of impactful work becomes the accepted norm rather than the noteworthy exception.

Concluding Remarks

I still believe Extension is one of our most important public institutions. Extension leaders, nationwide, must help the organization's professionals successfully navigate the future by establishing a clear direction in which to go and encouraging the growth of strategic and impactful partnerships. Organizational barriers to success should be identified and removed so that Extension professionals are free to find the best ways to positively affect their communities, a sentiment expressed by King (2018) as well. If these suggestions become reality, Extension's public value will shine brightly for all to see.

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