

Mississippi Residents' Perceptions of Extension

Abstract

A representative sample of Mississippi residents were asked about their knowledge and perceptions of the Mississippi State University (MSU) Extension Service through an online questionnaire. About half of the respondents were aware of MSU Extension, but fewer than one fifth had used MSU Extension resources. Respondents who were aware of MSU Extension had generally positive perceptions of MSU Extension's characteristics and believed those characteristics to be important. Like previous empirical and anecdotal evidence, these results support continued characterization of Extension as a "best-kept secret." There is a clear need to improve awareness of Extension and the resources it makes available to the public.

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Introduction

The Cooperative Extension Service began in 1914 to disseminate research results from land-grant universities to agricultural producers, though the scope of Extension has since expanded (Campbell, 1998). When Extension began, more than 30% of the workforce was directly involved in agriculture (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2014), but now less than 2% of the U.S. population is involved in agricultural production (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2012).

With such demographic shifts, familiarity with Extension and its programming has been impaired (Abrams, Meyers, Irani, & Baker, 2010). Research has shown varied awareness of Extension through the years, with awareness levels dwindling more recently. For example, awareness of Extension among the general public was at 40% and 45% of the population in 1982 and 1995, respectively (Warner, Christenson, Dillman, & Salant, 1996). However, only 27% of the population was aware of Extension in 2008 (North, 2011), and only 26% in 2015 (Settle, Rumble, McCarty, & Ruth, 2017). As awareness of Extension has declined, so has use of Extension. In both 1982 and 1995, 26% of people had used Extension (Warner et al., 1996), whereas in

2008, only 11% had (North, 2011). For some time, Extension has been facing budget cuts and shifting political support (e.g., Varea-Hammond, 2004), challenges that likely are affected by decreased awareness and use of the organization.

Although awareness and use of Extension are low in general, those who are aware of and use Extension tend to have positive perceptions of Extension. Warner et al. (1996) found that the majority of respondents in their study of the public perception of Extension wanted funding for all areas of Extension programming to remain the same or to increase. Similarly, research conducted in 2008 showed that of those who used Extension, 83% believed the organization was very good or excellent (North, 2011).

All these results help feed into the anecdotal assessment that Extension is a best-kept secret (DeBord, 2007). Extension's future success will not be assured unless more people become aware of the organization. To improve awareness, personnel in Extension need to understand target populations, including both people who are aware of the organization and those who are not.

Extension's embodiment of multiple roles complicates the situation. Extension is a complex organization that has different meanings for various stakeholders (Warner et al., 1996). Public organizations often deal with the hurdle of representing multiple identities (Hoggett, 2006; Wæraas, 2008), but Extension must take specific steps to clear this hurdle, as noted two decades ago by Warner et al. (1996): "Future support will need to be developed through coalitions of individuals with very different needs and expectations. Our success at building that alliance of supporters may very well determine Extension's future" ("What Does It Mean," para. 8).

Extension stakeholders believe that increased visibility is a top priority (North, 2011). Members of the public are unlikely to engage with Extension services if they are unaware of the organization. And as a public organization, Extension is unlikely to maintain its viability without public support (Hoggett, 2006; Moore, 1995).

Whereas the previously mentioned studies assessed Extension perceptions nationally, our purpose with the study reported here was to assess perceptions of the Mississippi State University (MSU) Extension service. Assessing awareness in individual states is necessary given that differences exist in public knowledge of and perceptions about Extension locally and nationally (North, 2011). Each state's Extension system is unique, and though national research helps us understand the big picture, Extension operates mostly at state and local levels, meaning that we need to understand what is happening within individual states and to learn from each state's successes and failures. Our specific objectives were (a) to describe awareness and use of MSU Extension, (b) to identify perceptions of characteristics of MSU Extension, and (c) to assess people's likelihood of engaging in MSU Extension programming on various topics.

Methods

We developed a questionnaire to assess Mississippi residents' knowledge and perceptions of MSU Extension via an online survey. The questions discussed herein were part of a larger instrument that assessed perceptions of *The Food Factor*, a weekly food-related program that is shown on Mississippi TV stations, included in the weekly agricultural news program *Farmweek*, and available online (Brubaker, Settle, Downey, & Hardman, 2017).

The questions described here addressed respondents' awareness and use of MSU Extension, perceptions of

MSU Extension, beliefs about whether MSU Extension exhibits various Extension-oriented characteristics, perceptions of the importance of those characteristics, and likelihood of engaging in various categories of programming in the 12 months following completion of the questionnaire. Those who were unaware of MSU Extension completed only the awareness question and were then provided a description of Extension before being asked which types of Extension programming they were likely to engage in during the subsequent 12 months. For the question on types of programming, one listed option related to personal health, so it is possible that responses to that item were affected by the focus of much of the instrument on nutrition-related topics; however, the other questions likely were unaffected.

To help us establish validity, personnel from the MSU Office of Agricultural Communications reviewed and provided input on the instrument, including by providing the list of Extension characteristics assessed. Additionally, the instrument was reviewed by two Extension evaluation specialists to help ensure its usability and validity. We used frequency counts and means to describe the data presented in this article.

The population for the study was Mississippi residents. We obtained an online panel of respondents deemed representative of adults in Mississippi, according 2010 U.S. Census data for the categories of sex, Hispanic status, and race, by using quota-based sampling through Qualtrics. The initial request for participation did not identify the study topic other than through content in the consent form indicating that the questionnaire addressed nutrition. Respondent demographics are displayed in Table 1. There was a slight majority of female respondents (51.5%), and most respondents were either White (59.7%) or Black or African American (38.4%). Only 2.2% reported being Hispanic or Latino. Median income in the state at the time of data collection was \$40,528 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.), whereas 56.8% of our respondents reported having a household income below \$40,000, indicating that the sample overall had lower income as compared to the population of the state.

Table 1.
Respondent Demographics

Characteristic	Sample demographics	Mississippi demographics
	% (<i>f</i>)	%
Sex		
Female	51.5 (208)	51.4
Male	48.5 (196)	48.6
Race		
White	59.7 (241)	59.1
Black or African American	38.4 (155)	37.0
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.7 (3)	0.5
Asian	0.2 (1)	0.9
Other	1.0 (4)	1.3
Hispanic/Latino		

No	97.8 (395)	96.3
Yes	2.2 (9)	2.7

Results

Awareness and Use of MSU Extension

About half of the respondents (49.0%, $f = 198$) were aware of MSU Extension, and 17.1% ($f = 69$) had used MSU Extension resources. Of those who were aware of MSU Extension, only 34.8% had used MSU Extension resources. Applying a 5-point scale ranging from 1 = *very negative* to 5 = *very positive*, respondents overall indicated having positive perceptions of Extension ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.92$). As shown in Table 2, the majority of respondents either had never heard anyone talk about MSU Extension or had heard others talk about MSU Extension less than once per month.

Table 2.

How Often Respondents Had Heard Others Talk About Mississippi State University (MSU) Extension

Response	% (f)
I never have heard anyone talk about MSU Extension	37.4 (74)
Less than once per month	39.9 (79)
At least once per month	10.6 (21)
2–3 times per month	6.6 (13)
Every week	5.6 (11)

Perceptions of MSU Extension Characteristics

Respondents who were aware of Extension agreed that MSU Extension exhibited all the characteristics listed on the instrument (Table 3). Agreement was highest for "helps improve the quality of life in communities across the state of Mississippi" and "provides information you can trust." Agreement was lowest for "works at improving the lives of the disadvantaged" and "provides information in a variety of ways."

Table 3.

Belief That Mississippi State University (MSU) Extension Exhibits Particular Characteristics

Characteristic	M (SD)
Helps improve the quality of life in communities across the state of Mississippi	3.97 (0.89)
Provides information you can trust	3.95 (0.97)
Provides information/programs/services that are easy and convenient to access and use	3.90 (0.96)

Offers information and programs for all types of people in the community	3.90 (0.96)
Provides information and resources that are relevant to the needs of your community	3.90 (0.95)
Works to bring about positive change and solve problems in the community	3.88 (0.94)
Has information available via the internet so you can get it when you want it	3.87 (0.97)
Has committed employees and volunteers who truly care	3.86 (0.99)
Has knowledgeable employees and volunteers	3.85 (0.99)
Provides the latest research-based information and thinking on a variety of topics	3.80 (0.99)
Has a reliable county office	3.78 (0.93)
Offers programs that can provide you with in-person training and help	3.75 (0.95)
Provides information that has been reviewed by experts	3.73 (0.99)
Works at improving the lives of the disadvantaged	3.72 (0.94)
Provides information in a variety of ways	3.68 (1.04)

Note. Scale ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

Table 4 shows respondents' perceptions of the importance of the characteristics listed on the instrument, which all respondents considered important. The characteristics perceived as most important were "provides information you can trust" and "provides the latest research-based information and thinking on a variety of topics." The characteristics perceived as least important were "provides information in a variety of ways" and "offers programs that can provide you with in-person training and help."

Table 4.

Importance of Mississippi State University Extension Characteristics

Characteristic	M (SD)
Provides information you can trust	4.06 (0.99)
Provides the latest research-based information and thinking on a variety of topics	4.04 (0.99)
Has information available via the internet so you can get it when you want it	4.01 (1.00)
Has knowledgeable employees and volunteers	4.01 (1.00)
Has committed employees and volunteers who truly care	4.00 (1.06)
Helps improve the quality of life in communities across the state of Mississippi	3.99 (1.09)
Provides information/programs/services that are easy and convenient to access and use	3.99 (1.03)
Provides information and resources that are relevant to the needs of your community	3.97 (1.01)
Works to bring about positive change and solve problems in the community	3.94 (1.06)
Works at improving the lives of the disadvantaged	3.94 (1.04)
Provides information that has been reviewed by experts	3.93 (1.07)

Offers information and programs for all types of people in the community	3.92 (1.05)
Has a reliable county office	3.92 (1.04)
Provides information in a variety of ways	3.82 (1.06)
Offers programs that can provide you with in-person training and help	3.81 (1.06)

Note. Scale ranged from 1 = *not important* to 5 = *extremely important*.

Likelihood of Engaging in MSU Extension Programming

All respondents, including those who initially were unaware of MSU Extension, were asked about the likelihood that they would use MSU Extension resources related to various topics (Table 5). Personal health was the most highly rated topic, followed by the topics of gardening and landscaping and personal finance. The topics with the lowest ratings were small business, agriculture, and family relationships.

Table 5.

Likelihood of Using Mississippi State University Extension Information, Programs, or Services on Various Topics in Subsequent 12 Months

Topic	<i>M (SD)</i>
Personal health	3.54 (1.43)
Gardening and landscaping	3.29 (1.43)
Personal finance	3.26 (1.40)
Community improvement	3.19 (1.35)
Environmental conservation	3.17 (1.37)
Youth development	3.11 (1.42)
Family relationships	3.01 (1.38)
Agriculture	2.97 (1.49)
Small business	2.92 (1.43)

Note. Scale ranged from 1 = *unlikely* to 5 = *likely*.

Discussion and Recommendations

Mississippi residents' awareness of MSU Extension was higher than that suggested by results from past national studies on awareness of Extension (Settle et al., 2017; Warner et al., 1996). This finding indicates that there is likely to be variation across states, a scenario that is important to understand because Extension largely operates at state and local levels.

Although almost half of respondents had heard of MSU Extension, less than one fifth had used Extension

resources. That said, not only awareness but also use of Extension was higher among Mississippians than participants in nationally focused research (North, 2011). Additionally, our respondents' perceptions of MSU Extension were generally positive. However, there is still a need to increase awareness and use through promotion of MSU Extension and its resources. MSU Extension is accountable to all Mississippi residents, not just those who are aware of it, a concept that is especially important in an era of budget cuts nationwide.

Two especially encouraging findings from our study are that respondents generally agreed that MSU Extension embodies the variety of characteristics listed in the instrument and that they viewed all the characteristics as important. The two most important were the characteristics of providing trustworthy information and providing current research-based information on a variety of topics, underpinning Extension's role as a purveyor of information.

As for specific topics, personal health, gardening and landscaping, and personal finance were the topics of highest interest to participants in our survey. It should be noted that the rest of the instrument assessed respondents' perceptions and behaviors related to food and nutrition, a circumstance that could have skewed the results regarding the topic of personal health, though past research supports the idea that personal health is a topic the public wants information about (North, 2011). Although Extension almost certainly will continue providing services related to all the topics listed in the questionnaire, it is important for Extension personnel to know which topics members of the public are likely to notice. As Extension personnel seek to improve awareness, emphasizing such topics is likely to help.

In line with numerous studies and anecdotal evidence (Debord, 2007; North, 2011; Settle et al., 2017; Warner et al., 1996), MSU Extension embodies the same best-kept-secret status that Extension has nationwide. Awareness and use are low among the general population, but when people are aware of Extension, they tend to have positive perceptions of it. Unfortunately, if lack of awareness persists, the public will not even know what they are losing access to if legislators move to cut funding for Extension. Even among those in our study who were aware of Extension, they were most likely to rarely or never hear others talk about MSU Extension. For an organization that is embedded in every county in the state, that circumstance is troubling.

A ready-made solution to the problem of lack of awareness and use of Extension does not exist. Instead, Extension personnel must continue to pursue diligently various efforts to improve awareness and use of Extension among all populations. All who work to promote Extension must consider the complexity of the organization, what it means to its stakeholders, and how it addresses their needs. Extension means different things to different people (Warner et al., 1996). Embarking on a single marketing campaign or promoting a single program is unlikely to draw in the entire population. However, the results of our research indicate that some topics are of more interest to the public than others, and such topics should be areas of emphasis for moving Extension forward in Mississippi. Given the lack of awareness and use of Extension, more targeted marketing activities also are warranted to reach new audience segments. As well, promotion of Extension via social media is worth further exploration because Extension professionals can use social media outlets to reach new audiences, especially communities focused around interest areas Extension addresses (e.g., gardening and landscaping, youth development), without incurring the input costs of traditional media promotion. Still, social media promotion must be used effectively and not viewed as a panacea.

Extension personnel also need to continue to conduct research addressing awareness and use. The results

from our study indicate higher awareness and use in Mississippi than nationwide. Research addressing what differences are occurring across states and why these differences are occurring is needed. Extension exists across the country, but its individual activities funnel down to state organizations and county offices. This situation creates a challenge with regard to developing a unified image for an organization that is inherently fragmented to meet the needs of local populations. Consequently, we need to understand how members of the public view Extension in specific localities, as well as nationally, for Extension to be successful.

Author Notes

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