

Editor's Note

The following article inaugurates “Practice Stories from the Field,” a new section of the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* that will feature critically reflective accounts of publicly engaged scholars’ work and experience. The editors welcome submissions of articles for this section that add new insights to and perspectives on the theory and practice of scholarly engagement in public work and life.

The profile of John Gerber published here is not a standard academic article or essay. Nor is it a “case study.” Rather, it is an oral history that was edited from the transcript of an in-depth interview. The purpose of the interview was not to elicit John’s views about engagement. Rather, following a narrative orientation to qualitative interviewing, the purpose was to draw out richly detailed first-person stories of his work and experience as a publicly engaged scholar.¹ The profile features two main stories: a broadly cast story about the origins and evolution of John’s academic career, and a specific practice story about his work as Director of the Massachusetts Cooperative Extension System at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (now called “UMass Extension”). There is a great deal to learn from each of these stories about the theme of this special issue: faculty motivation for engagement in public scholarship and work. What we learn is both inspiring and troubling. The inspiring part has to do with John’s remarkably candid and reflexive account of how he lost—and then recovered and renewed—what he refers to as his “soul”: his motivating purpose for pursuing an academic career as a scientist. The troubling part comes from his account and sober assessment of the dynamics of power and interests in the context of an organizational change initiative he led that was designed to diversify and strengthen UMass Extension’s public relationships, work, and mission. It is important to note that we should not look to John’s profile for the objective “Truth” about what “really” happened during this initiative. Rather, we should look to it for insights into the subjective truths of his experience, and for the implications of these truths for the emerging civic engagement and responsibility movement in American higher education.²

—Scott Peters

¹For details on the methodology used in constructing this profile, see Profiles of Practitioners: Practice Stories from the Field (<http://courses.cit.cornell.edu/practicestories/>).

²The “narrative turn” in the social sciences has resulted in the development of a robust set of methods and tools that scholars can use to illuminate, analyze, and interpret such truths. The best single source on narrative inquiry is D.J. Clandinin, ed., *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007). For a discussion of the nature and meaning of “truth” in narrative inquiry, see Personal Narratives Group, “Truths,” in *Interpreting Women’s Lives* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989).

***A Profile of John Gerber: Professor,
Department of Plant, Soil, and Insect Sciences,
University of Massachusetts at Amherst***

Interview conducted by Scott Peters, June 25, 2002

Profile edited by Scott Peters, Robert Ojeda,
and John Gerber

I'm a professor in the Department of Plant, Soil, and Insect Sciences in the College of Food and Natural Resources here at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (UMass). Most of my work is focused on undergraduate teaching. I have a 25 percent Extension appointment, but I'm not sure what that means. I came to UMass from the University of Illinois in the fall of 1992. I was hired as the Director of the Massachusetts Cooperative Extension System from my former position as an administrator at the Agricultural Experiment Station at the University of Illinois. I came as a tenured faculty member, but the primary appointment was administrative. I left the Extension administration position at UMass two years ago.

At Illinois, prior to my administrative experience I was an Extension Specialist with a partial research appointment. I didn't have a lot of teaching responsibilities there, but today, my primary role is teaching. In effect that takes me right back to the beginning of my early days of graduate school, where teaching was my primary love. I had gotten away from formal classroom teaching because of my Extension work.

I'm currently creating new courses. I'm teaching an undergraduate course called Sustainable Agriculture. I also teach Dialogue on Agricultural Issues, which explores controversial issues in agriculture and biotechnology, food safety, and corporatization. We use a dialogue format. We sit in a circle and follow a mindfulness practice. We're conscious of the things we say and the things we hear and our body's reactions to words. So I'm teaching listening skills and dialogue technique as well as exploring controversial issues.

I also teach a course called Agricultural Systems Thinking, which uses Peter Senge's work from *The Fifth Discipline*, and some of the work out of the Hawkesbury College of Agriculture at the University of Western Sydney that was developed by Richard Bawden twenty years ago called Soft Systems Analysis. We put those two works together and look at farming in the systemic mode,

at underlying and root causes and structure, to try to understand why people do what they do in a farming system. I'll be teaching a new course called Holistic Management for Small Farms and Homesteads next spring for the first time. They're all pretty much new courses that the department has asked me to develop because of student demand.

I've only come to see my life work this way recently, but it really feels like it's about *healing*. I feel like I have the opportunity, particularly today with undergraduates, to provide them with a safe environment in the university, an oasis of sorts. They are bombarded by a destructive "power-over" kind of thinking in most of their classrooms. I try to provide a safe place where they can learn and explore what they truly want to know. In my classes, we're very clear on thinking about what our core values are, and how does our daily behavior express those values. Because when your daily actions are inconsistent with your core values, you're headed for a place of insanity. I see that in individuals, and I see that in organizations.

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My role primarily is healer. The connection that works for me is the connection with the earth, which is a healing place for me, and the connection with other people that also care about food and the land. I think fragmentation is universal. I don't work in all the other forums that are possible for healing. My place is where I can connect people who care about food and the land.

I grew up in a suburb within eyesight of the Empire State Building. It had been a farm at one time, but the farm was long gone by the time I grew up. I had very little interest in anything to do with the land. My love was of the sea. I grew up on the water on Long Island Sound, actually in Great Neck on the north shore of Long Island. I went to school to study oceanography because I cared about the water, and I cared so much about the poor state of the ocean at the time, particularly in the New York area where it was dirty and dangerous.

I spent all my summers sailing or motor boating or water skiing or just swimming and being by the water. The place that I grew up was not a built-up community at the time. There was a lot of forest

and fields, and I watched all that disappear as I grew up. They built banks and post offices, and all the places that I ran as a kid are now parking lots. That bothered me. But the freedom I had was on the water. The water was still open, but it was dirty.

Science teachers, particularly biology and earth science teachers, were my mentors. I had a real passion for the earth, expressed in the early days around the ocean and marine life, so I gravitated towards science teachers. I was not at all involved in community life as an activist. I had a close neighborhood with several close friends, and I wasn't very good at sports, so we spent all of our time water skiing and scuba diving and playing on the water.

After I finished high school I wanted to find a place where I could study oceanography. I went to the University of Rhode Island because they had a powerful graduate program. I started studying marine botany and phycology, and I just loved it. I had a great marine algae collection. I was moved by hunger. I cared very deeply about starvation, which was being talked about around the planet, and I really thought we could feed the world through the oceans. As I studied marine biology, it dawned on me that was probably not going to happen.

The real hot issues of late '60s and early '70s in biology were twofold. They were the green revolution and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. The green revolution was about the perceived success of feeding the planet, and *Silent Spring* was about the downside of that. All the action in biology that I could see in the late '60s and early '70s was in agriculture. So I wanted to be where the action was.

At Rhode Island I began to get involved in food issues. I joined a food co-op, I started eating macrobiotic and organic diets. I was exposed to J. I. Rodale and organic farming and gardening. I read *Mother Earth News*, and all the stuff that came out of the environmental movement. It just spoke to me. And the passion I had around the cleaning of the planet and feeding the planet shifted from the ocean to the land during those days. I completed a degree in botany because I was too far into it to switch to agriculture. But when I went to look for graduate schools, I looked at agricultural programs.

My experience in undergraduate education was based in science. I had really good science training in biology, physics, and chemistry, but there was no passion. The first mentor in my life that really influenced me was in graduate school. I was soul-searching on my own, not knowing it as an undergraduate, and finding science to be satisfying but not motivating.

I got my degree at University of Rhode Island in botany with a minor in chemistry. When I finished at Rhode Island, I had already fallen in love with organic farming. There was a teaching assistantship at Cornell to teach organic gardening, and it just seemed like the dream job for me. I knew nothing about Cornell; I knew nothing about the Department of Vegetable Crops or Bill Kelly, the individual I was going to work with. I happened to fall into a situation that was ideal for me, with an amazing group of people. I went there primarily to teach organic gardening. I came to work with Bill Kelly, and I later found out he was probably the leading voice in vegetable physiology and ecology through the '50s and '60s. But I didn't know anything about him at the time. I happened to luck into him, and he was progressive. He was teaching organic gardening at a time when this wasn't done at a land-grant university.

I went to Cornell in 1973 and signed up for a Ph.D. Bill explained to me that I had to do a master's. The teaching assistantship was the primary thing that I went for, but I also went to work with Bill and do research.

My experience at Cornell was amazing. I took everything I knew about science and applied it to a real situation in farming, which was for me making it practical, making it useful. I had not done that up to that point. It was really important to me that I could look at farms and say, "What I know about physiology and ecology can be applied to that farming situation." That was really powerful. I wanted to continue to work with organic foods, but the institution was set up such that that was not supported. They allowed us

to teach it, but they would not really encourage research in organic farming at the time. So I basically did two degrees. I did the organic teaching part of my work; I created a teaching manual and got very much involved in teaching organic gardening. At the same time, I did a pretty traditional Ph.D. in vegetable physiology. I ended up doing what I thought, and Bill agreed, was two degrees, whereas today, you wouldn't have that kind of pressure. The organic route would be acceptable today, but it was not at the time.

I still wanted to feed the world, I still wanted to heal the earth, though I didn't use those words at the time. I was still moved by

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the destruction of the planet, a lot of it through farming. And I was still moved by the problem of hunger. I really felt that I wanted to get involved in tropical agriculture. I took a minor in International Agriculture and I hung out with all the folks from overseas. Most of my friends were from places like Iraq and Iran (which were not at war at the time), Taiwan, and South America. I really felt like I wanted to go where the hunger was.

The focus of my dissertation was basic plant physiology. I had proposed to do a dissertation about how to teach organic gardening more effectively, looking at the pedagogy and the teaching process and all that. But the department head at the time told me that I would never graduate with that kind of a focus, that I needed to do something, in his words, that was “real.” I had observed a phenomenon in a plant called *Ipomea aquatica*, an aquatic plant that grew in rice paddies. We were using it to demonstrate nutrition deficiency symptoms in one of the classes I was teaching. I noticed that when you took potassium away from the plant it went iron deficient. So there was probably some relationship between potassium and iron in the plant that was not expressed in other plants. When you took potassium away from other plants they look potassium deficient. So I looked at the fundamental physiology of potassium and iron relationships in a plant called water convolvulus, which has absolutely no practicality to anybody. But it got me a Ph.D. It was very clear they would not allow me to follow my own personal passion. I had to do something that was acceptable to the institution. So I found something and did it.

I had some exposure to the Extension faculty while I was at Cornell, but they were really not looked upon as first-class members of the Vegetable Crops department. While Bill Kelly was a good friend of theirs, it was certainly a sense of “They’re not quite as good as the rest of us,” meaning from most of the other faculty and grad students. Extension faculty spent all their time out on the road, so I never had an opportunity to engage with them. Towards the end of my graduate time there, I started to travel with Phil Mingus, who was the leading Extension professor in vegetable crops at the time. I was blown away by his level of commitment to the vegetable industry in New York State, which I knew very little about. I had gone through almost five years at Cornell and didn’t have a clue what Extension was about. I didn’t know very much about the vegetable industry in New York State. It was all right there and I never took advantage of it, because I was teaching undergraduates and doing fundamental research. I was never exposed to the richness of Extension work that was very, very strong at the

time. I think it's probably lost to a large extent now, but at the time Extension was very much engaged in direct work with vegetable farmers. I had a couple of field tours, we got on a bus and we went and visited the muck farms in my vegetable crops class, but getting out much was just not done.

While I was at Cornell, there was a debate culture on science issues in my department. It was fascinating. There were coffee-room conversations, which I loved, twice a day with the faculty and graduate students. They were largely around science issues. We would actively debate ammonium and nitrate nutrition of tomatoes. But the debates were not about public issues. Where I found public issues debates was in the International Agriculture program in Bradfield Hall. People in that program were concerned about the effects of the green revolution and hunger issues. So I went there to take part in those debates, and I loved it.

After I finished my Ph.D., I wanted to go overseas. The only job offered to me was at the College of the Virgin Islands. Because it was tropical, I decided that's where I wanted to be. It would give me a good tropical experience. I ended up spending two years at what is now the University of the Virgin Islands in St. Croix doing research on vegetable and fruit production, thinking once again that we needed to feed the world. I was still driven by that concern around hunger, and about small farmers in the Caribbean having an opportunity to produce vegetables.

The political system was such that nobody really had to work very hard in the Virgin Islands. Almost everybody had a government job or worked at a hotel. Nobody really wanted to grow vegetables, because it was hard work. I had the largest vegetable farm on the island, and that was my research plot. Whereas I think some of the other islands in the area were actually interested in the research, the variety trials, the fertility work, the irrigation work, and all the production practices, there was no economic incentive to grow vegetables in a U.S. protectorate.

I decided to leave out of frustration. I felt that I was working really hard and nobody cared. I decided that I needed to get a real job, a publicly acceptable job at a major land-grant university. I ended up getting a job at the University of Illinois. At that point, I had not lost my passion about hunger. I saw the University of Illinois as a major agricultural institution, a highly prestigious land-grant university, and I wanted to be part of something that was perceived to be a big deal. I had a huge ego and a sense of importance around myself, having come out of Cornell. I had spent two years not being appreciated by anybody, and I wanted to go

someplace where people would notice me and notice my work and care about agriculture. I really felt like the Midwest would give me both a new experience, and an opportunity to be around folks that cared about farming.

I interviewed for the Illinois job while I was at an American Society for Horticultural Science meeting in Columbus, Ohio. It was a very political process. My major memory was that some of the people who were interviewing me were old and tired. They were angry professors who were not happy. I thought I could show them how it was supposed to be done, being young and arrogant. After the interview in Ohio I went to the Illinois campus. My major memory of that visit is that there were three hurricanes that week while I was out of town, and I was worried about my wife and my young son back on St. Croix. I traveled around Illinois, and I saw an agriculture that I was unaware of: so enormous, so impressive. There were huge fields of pumpkins and tomatoes, and of course corn and beans. There were huge vegetable operations. And I thought that that's where I wanted to be, because of the power of the place.

I got offered the job, and instantaneously I was in love with the place. My position was 75 percent Extension and 25 percent research. I was hired as the Extension Program Leader for vegetable crops, which meant that at a very young age I was responsible for leading a team of entomologists, pathologists, and weed scientists all across the state of Illinois, which was incredibly large. I was in a leadership role. It was actually my first leadership role, and I did fairly well at it. I built an organization that they applauded, and they provided me with all the institutional rewards that these places offer.

I was at Illinois for thirteen years, from 1978 to 1992. The last three years I was an administrator, but I was ten years on the faculty as an Extension specialist. And excelled at it. I built a convention and trade show that went from one hundred to two thousand participants in an eight-year period because of my organizational and marketing skills. I became very active in my national organization, became an officer in the organization, all the things that the institution rewards. I had a lot of graduate students and a lot of industry

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grants. I did a lot of field experiments that were rewarded and published. I averaged thirty field trials a year on farms all throughout the state. I had an average drive of five hundred miles north and five hundred miles south in a huge loop, which I did over a one- or two-day period.

I did everything the institution asked me to do. I was applauded, I was advanced very quickly, I got money, I got involved with industry, I was being flown around the country in corporate jets. I had enormous success, and in the process, I lost my soul. I forgot the reason I got into science. I lost everything that I cared about—the land, the food and hunger—and I became a major land-grant success. I was working with industry. I was taking industry grants. I was helping farmers make money. The issues around the environment and hunger just disappeared, because they were not fundable. I did all the things the institution expects you to do.

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In 1987, I got an opportunity to go on a sabbatical leave. I went to Australia for a year. The project I was supposed to work on with a local bank was a project where we were going to use computers (it was the early days of computers) to do financial planning with farmers, and farm management. Then the bank pulled the plug on the project just as I arrived. So I had a year in Australia with nothing to do.

The government gave me an office that was full of books. They were actually being stored in a box. I started looking through the books, and the first thing I found was Paulo Freire’s *Education for Critical Consciousness*. Thumbing through it, I saw his critique of Extension, and that was like a door that opened up during a time in my life when I was low. I hated my job. I was blaming everybody else, and I couldn’t see what was wrong. What was wrong was I had lost my soul. I had lost my reason for being, for doing the work that I wanted to do. So I found this little book, and I started reading it. At the time, my brother was at the University of Massachusetts studying in the public health field. He started sending me similar articles and books to read while I was in Australia.

At the time, the state of Victoria, Australia, had just gone through a change of government, and they were going through an organizational crisis about what Extension is. So because I was an out-of-town expert, they asked me to come and talk about the land-grant system. Well, I knew nothing about the land-grant system. So

I went to the University of Melbourne library and I started reading about it. I read all the literature about the history of the land-grant system, which I knew nothing about. After five years in graduate school and almost ten years at a public land-grant system, I knew nothing about the land-grant system. And I fell in love with it. I thought, “What a lovely idea.” And I woke up. I woke up to something I truly cared about, because it spoke to me. And I found it at a time in my life where I had professionally bottomed out and I didn’t know why.

When I went back to the University of Illinois in 1988, I came back with purpose, and it was a public purpose. It was about participatory research, it was about community-based agriculture, it was about land-grant ideals. And I knew nothing about any of that as a public scientist until I went to Australia. I applied for a job at the University of California at Davis as a vegetable specialist. There was a war going on around pesticides in California at the time, and I wanted to be in the middle of the fight, because the environmentalist in me had woken up. My *Silent Spring* had “sprung” again. People started talking about sustainability. There was a lot of anger around environmental issues in agriculture, a lot of debate on pesticides, and I just wanted to be where the debate was happening.

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The University of Illinois was getting beat up by the Illinois Environmental Council at the time. The story I was told was that the new Dean of the College of Agriculture went to a public forum where the Illinois Environmental Council took him to task about sustainable agriculture issues, and he didn’t have a clue what that meant. I had sold my house, I was moving to California, and he asked the Dean of Resident Instruction, who was my former department head, “Who have you got who can talk to these crazy people?” And for some reason, they decided that I was the one that could talk to the sustainable ag people. So they hired me as the Assistant Director of the Agricultural Experiment Station, and they gave me the task of doing nothing but listening. They sent me to southern Illinois where a lot of the debate was going on. They said, “Go down there and find out what’s going on, but don’t say anything. Just listen for a year.”

I had all this stuff on participatory research in my head that I had never practiced in my life, and I got to listen to farmers talk about their problems. They were forming community groups on their own because the university was doing nothing to help them answer problems they had on the landscape, which was largely corn and beans. Because I spent a year listening to them and showing up at meetings, largely around kitchen tables and barns, they started trusting me. From there, we built the Agroecology Program at the University of Illinois.

When I did finally leave Illinois in 1992, the reasons were largely personal. I was from the East Coast, and my kids were getting older and I wanted them to see their grandparents. I was in an administrative role at Illinois, but I was clearly the assistant, and I really wanted to take more responsibility to try to change an organization in a really fundamental way. I spent a lot of time reading on my own about organizational behavior, systems science, and systems thinking. As I saw it, an organization like the University of Illinois was a place that was too successful and too big to seriously “turn the battleship.” The political forces in Illinois were such that they would always allow us to dabble in environmental issues and community-based work, but not much more, because the Farm Bureau was too powerful.

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With all this in mind, I applied for the position of Director of the Massachusetts Cooperative Extension System at UMass Amherst. I wanted an opportunity to come home to the East Coast, as well as to practice some of the theory that I had been learning in a place that I thought was so disrupted they might be able to make a change. Extension in Massachusetts had just gone through a huge budget cut where they had fired 60 percent of their staff. Following Dukakis’ run for president in 1988, they discovered a huge budget crisis and started firing people. There were three years of budget cuts where Extension’s state allocation was cut from five and a half million dollars to zero.

In my interview for the job, I shared my theories about organizational behavior and systems thinking. I heard a lot of resonance. I heard a lot of folks saying, “Yeah, we’ve got to try something.” I

had a sense that the place was desperate. The Extension staff had experienced three years of budget cuts, where they lost their best friends through firing. I felt a tremendous sense of desperation, which I had hoped could be translated into creativity. I got offered the position, and we moved in the summer of 1992.

Using my experience at Illinois, I spent my first year as Extension director listening, traveling the state and visiting every nook and cranny. What I really wanted to hear was what constituents and field agents had to say about what had happened to Extension. I heard a lot of anger, I heard a lot fear, and I heard a lot of confusion. People were totally confused. They had a system that was very, very well-funded, and the constituents and the field agents loved it dearly. For some reason it had been gutted, and they didn't understand why.

I felt it was really important to begin to understand the organization at a personal level. The members of the organization and its closest advisors had to begin to understand that they were in a new world, and they were trying to do things that the greater populace was not interested in, but their closest and best friends continued to want. And I really felt that they had to hear that directly. So we developed a marketing campaign where the theme was "listen to your customers." We did focus groups and we did surveys.

As an example, the whole Extension staff, which at that time was only about two hundred people, spent one night all over the state making random phone calls to citizens of the Commonwealth. They asked them a series of questions about how they perceived Cooperative Extension. There were two good things about that. First, they did something together as an organization. It was the first time they had done something positive together after three years of budget cuts. The second thing was they heard loud and clear that almost nobody knew who they were, that they were irrelevant. And the few people who did know who they were said, "You are the people who used to do gardening. You are the people that used to do 4-H." They heard loud and clear they were no longer relevant to common citizens. That was powerful.

What I hoped would happen was that we would be able to do some radical and fundamental changes in our vision and values. I hoped that we could begin to build a new relationship with a new clientele, and heal old boundaries such as the one between rural 4-H and urban Youth at Risk programs. In agriculture, we had an IPM [integrated pest management] vegetable program and we had a traditional vegetable program, and they didn't communicate, they

didn't organize, they didn't talk with each other very often. I really felt like by focusing outside the institution on some public needs, we might be able to reorganize and restructure the organization itself, focusing on public good rather than private benefit. We had become a group of people who were serving the private interests of a very small constituency.

County funding had been eliminated, so we moved into a new structure for the organization. We reorganized by moving from a fourteen-county system to a four-program system. The four programs were Agroecology, 4-H Youth and Family Development, Nutrition Education, and Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation. We went from twenty-one programs that had grown up over the years, based on particular funding streams, and we organized them into four. I think that was huge. And it was probably something that could not have happened had we not had the funding crisis.

I went out and met with staff and advisory groups, and I asked questions. When they asked me about my vision, I talked about participation, I talked about citizen involvement, and I talked about public service. I never spoke specifically about any kind of organizational structure. I really didn't want to bias the organization. I changed the funding stream, and that was significant. The funding stream formerly went to the department heads, who would dole it out. I funded the four program areas, and I no longer got involved in how funding should be used at the program level. Former Extension directors controlled every penny. I gave all the money to the programs.

I established funding opportunities through what's called the Strategic Programs Funds, where folks could apply if they had a new idea. It meant we had to cut some of the things that were being done before. I made the hard decisions. I took money away from certain areas that I felt I could get away with politically, and established opportunities for people to try some new things. I talked about rewarding failure, I talked about teamwork and collaboration. We invested in consultants who would come and help us develop team-based evaluation processes, so that the director did not have to evaluate every individual on the staff. Prior to me, the director interviewed everybody and decided upon rewards himself.

I tried to create team-based evaluation processes that would support teamwork. I insisted upon an advisory structure that was diverse. For example, the vegetable team, which was part of the Agroecology Program, started getting the organic industry and

the organic leadership involved as part of their advisory structure. They got people who worked in the inner city around poverty and hunger issues as part of their advisory structure. So they were no longer listening only to vegetable growers. The apple team started working with Mothers and Others for Pesticide Limits, which some of them were afraid to do before I became director.

As part of the change process, the Dean of the College of Agriculture tried to combine the Agricultural Experiment Station and the Cooperative Extension Service under my leadership. I had been the assistant director of the Agricultural Experiment Station for three years. We felt that we needed to integrate research and extension into one system, and then combine the funding and the evaluation process. The Dean had been an Extension director at Kansas. He understood the need to combine research and Extension both on the actual functional level, and also the administrative level.

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But the department heads were so outraged by this thought that they put an end to that plan. They called me in and they explained to me that Extension was separate and they would not support combining it with research. They found no reason to do that. It was basically a power and rank issue around prestige, and research was more important than Extension. We had violated the institutional culture in the departments.

After that first attempt to bring together research and extension failed, what we did was we made all of the Extension professionals members of academic departments. They were formerly called Extension “agents,” and we changed that to Extension “educators.” We assigned every one of them to a department, which gave the departments more personnel. We also gave departments administrative support to manage that personnel. Department chairs liked that, because all of a sudden they had bigger departments. So that’s the way we combined research and extension. We couldn’t do it at the administrative level, but we were able to do it at the departmental level. That was a huge shift.

The next thing we did was we renamed the Massachusetts Cooperative Extension System. We called it “UMass Extension.” We effectively gave Extension to the university. Prior to that, the university looked at Extension as an outside-funded agency that had

to be managed. It somehow involved faculty, but it was definitely viewed as an outside institution. Our Chancellor, David Scott, had come from Michigan State. He understood what Extension was about. He understood it was a university function, and he absolutely thought it was wonderful. He was beginning to talk about academic outreach. The whole thing about scholarly outreach was in the air, and people started to see that the university system could benefit from Extension if it became part of the family. It also gave the university something to brag about. Prior to that, if Extension was successful, the University of Massachusetts got no credit. By changing the name, we gave credit to the university for our work. Politically, that was really important.

The big problem with what we did in all this was that we tried to change the structure without changing the mental model. You can't create teamwork and collaboration in organizations that carry power and control hierarchies in their mind. As soon as an Extension director leaves, if someone starts talking about money and the budget starts to become shaky, we revert to that which we know, which is the power and control hierarchy.

When I ended up leaving, the organization maintained its new structure. I think that was probably the single most lasting result of my work. But the mindset didn't change. We carry the hierarchy in our minds, and we carry the power of money and political influence in our minds. As much as we tried to diversify our constituency base and our advisory structure, the people that represent the status quo—the Farm Bureau, the agricultural commodity groups, the traditionalists in 4-H—reengaged with Extension and began to re-exert their power.

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I really felt like I had to leave as Extension director when they established an oversight function that was not diverse. It did not represent the diversity of our programs, or the diversity of our customer base or our citizen base. The people who wanted the old status quo were not interested in organic farmers, they were not interested in the poor, they were not interested in the hungry, they were not interested in the inner city, they were not interested in youth at risk. They represented traditional agriculture and traditional 4-H, and they held the power.

The traditional commodities in Massachusetts are the dairy industry, the wholesale apple industry, and the vegetable industry.

All of these are relatively small compared to any Midwestern state, but they continue to be the major self-appointed voices for Extension, and, of course, the traditional 4-H club system. And you know, they're all wonderful, but they're just not diverse enough. They're not a complete representation of who we're here to serve, and they have relatively limited interests.

We had a Commissioner of Agriculture in the state who continued to talk about putting money in the pockets of farmers, which is not a bad thing, but it's not a complete service to the public good. Representatives of the Farm Bureau and paid lobbyists could get their language passed. They used the Michigan model. Michigan passed legislation that increased the Extension budget substantially, provided that they would accept a citizen-based advisory structure. Well, Massachusetts used that model, but failed to increase the budget. They simply implemented the oversight function. And I personally got into a place where the values and the visions of the oversight committee were inconsistent with my own. They had enough political power perhaps to do us some good financially. They had ignored us for years, but when we survived, they reengaged with us and decided that we needed help. So I had to make a personal decision that I was either going to sacrifice my own personal values, my ideals of what the organization should be like, or else I had to hurt the prospects of increased financial support. I decided I could not choose to hurt the organization at that point.

We had worked very, very hard to diversify the people that we perceived we served. We had worked very, very hard to diversify the people who were giving us advice. We had worked very hard to combine programs, such as our traditional 4-H program and our Youth at Risk program, so that they were one. We now have one 4-H youth and family program. We have one agriculture program, called Agroecology. But these traditional commodity-based groups re-exerted their power, and when we tried to get the oversight group to be balanced across all four of our program areas, so that the inner-city nutrition program was equally represented with the agriculture program, they flexed their muscles and prevented that from happening. They created legislation, they got the governor to appoint the oversight committee, and they controlled it. We had worked pretty hard to create balance and diversity, and they created an oversight function that was highly skewed towards commercial production agriculture. They were not interested in looking at the needs of organic agriculture, community-based urban agriculture CSAs, or any of the more interesting developments in agriculture that were really quite progressive and doing quite well.

By the way, they created and filed the legislation without consulting me at all. Once the legislation had been filed, we were then approached by local legislators and asked how we felt about it. We felt that with certain provisions we could work with this body, and the provisions were that the structure of the oversight committee itself would have to be changed. We had agreed verbally that the structure that was created through legislation was not balanced

“When I proposed to broaden the representation on the oversight committee, it was voted down. And it was voted down with great anger and blame and all the hostility that comes from people who act out of fear.”

and not representative of all four programs. So we agreed to establish the oversight committee. We didn’t fight it. It would have been very difficult for us to fight it, and we would have created a lot of enemies. So we cut a deal. But when the committee came into existence, the memory of the deal faded. When I proposed to broaden the representation on the oversight committee, it was voted down. And it was voted down with great anger and blame and all the hostility that comes from people who act out of fear. This group was composed of representatives from

the Farm Bureau and major agricultural industries. They had supposedly gotten together to help us financially, but help us with a condition. This was basically done *to* us.

The total budget we had in Extension at that time was \$11 million. There were about two hundred people that were affiliated as employees. Some of them only had partial appointments, so at that time, we had about 125 FTEs. The budget was about 50 percent federal and 40 percent from UMass. UMass had increased their contribution for Extension during my tenure as director with internal university funds. I worked very closely with the Provost and the Chancellor, both of whom valued outreach. They were very, very good land-grant citizens. They really understood it, and we had an opportunity to do some hiring and investing in really creative areas. We were successful in getting a lot of grants for IPM, Youth at Risk, and nutrition in inner cities. The university was very, very good about matching all those grants and increasing our state money and doing what they thought was interesting academic outreach—outreach that was scholarly, but also served the public good. We had an administration during most of my tenure as Extension director that really understood land-grants.

During this whole period of change, we spent a lot of time talking about mission, purpose and vision, and values. I didn't expect increased funding until we got clear about who we were. We had a lot of internal conversations about purpose. I fed a lot of the literature on engagement and public purpose into the system, and there was great resonance with it. The mission statement was rewritten. The previous mission statement was a good one, but there was no engagement with it. People didn't live it. The former mission statement was about public purpose, and research and extension for the public good. What we did was we incorporated some of the new language about scholarship and academic outreach, service to people, children, and the land, a lot of language around that. There was a lot of resonance with that, and I think it was honest.

However, while we changed the structure and our language, people were still living in fear. And what I didn't understand at the time was that you really can't make a fundamental change out of a fear-based place. For a short period of time I think the fear was ameliorated. It went away for a while, but as soon as the budget got shaky, we began to act in ways that we had been taught over the years. We went right back to the same old power and control hierarchies and status quo kind of behaviors. If a legislator wants something, you better do it, whether it fits our mission or not, because we're acting out of fear. So the mission statement became irrelevant as we acted out all of our worst fears about survival. I didn't understand at the time that you can't make changes out of a fear-based place.

One of our tactics was to increase the engagement of both the research faculty and the faculty with Extension appointments. The strategy behind our decision to move Extension professional staff into the academic departments was to physically put them in proximity with research faculty. And that really has been successful. In horticulture, for example, the Extension staff sit side by side with the teaching and research faculty. And they've begun to do things together. That was intentional. The difficulty, as you might expect, is the prestige of research and the lack of prestige for Extension work. However, we have a lot of aging faculty who are looking for a reason to come to work. Many of them have found that outreach is a way of expressing what they care about. And it's fun; it's flat-out fun. So that's been successful.

We also created financial incentives. We put pools of money together so that staff could create an idea, identify a research faculty and Extension faculty and apply for it together. That works as long as the money is there. But when the money goes away, that doesn't

survive, whereas proximity continues. It's been interesting over the last few years for me to watch what works, what's sustainable. When you buy somebody's interest, it's not sustainable. Two people would often sit side by side, see each other, and develop personal relationships that resulted in ongoing partnerships. People who were an obstruction before, who never went to an Extension meeting, are now showing up at Extension meetings because of personal relationships, all driven by proximity and hanging out together.

Because of the structural changes, people are together on teams. They're working together, they're creating programs together. I think that continues. The advisory structure, however, has from what I can see snapped back to a very traditional base. So the major voices are the voices of the status quo. That's a shame, but that's the way it is. What happens next, I have no idea. My theory was that you create teams that listen to their constituencies, and that works as long as your constituencies are diverse. If your constituencies become one voice, the power-over voice of the status quo, then that no longer works.

When we were reorganizing, I really felt that the four program areas were different from each other today, whereas in 1900, or in the 1920s, they were close enough. Today 4-H is about youth, not youth on farms, and they need to be working in the inner cities. So I really felt that we could manage four separate programs that have very little to do with each other. I didn't think that oversight of all four programs was necessary. We created advisory systems around those separate programs. In fact, one of the programs we gave to a different college. The nutrition program became part of our College of Public Health. We also tried to give 4-H to the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences to really split Extension apart, so the old College of Agriculture would not manage all four programs. I thought that might be healthier for an organization that was supposed to be part of academic outreach.

Earlier I talked about falling in love with the land-grant system, its mission and ideals, while I was in Australia. To me, the land-grant mission is about healing. It's about looking at the fragmentation that exists in our lives and our organizations, including our knowledge systems, and reconnecting with something higher and bigger than ourselves. It's about a sense of service to the people, the community, and the land. That gives me a reason for being, for getting up in the morning and going to work.

I think we need to look beyond our own egos and our own fear-based, self-serving nature to heal the planet, to heal the community,

to heal the world. The change that needs to happen to allow this healing requires information, knowledge, and wisdom, and that's our particular arena. When we work in communities, we provide a source of inspiration and information. To me it's about healing, but nobody else understands that. In fact, nobody even uses that language.

Some people think about the land-grant mission as research-based knowledge in service to the public good. I don't think that's adequate. I don't think that's enough. To me that's incomplete, because it allows the public good to continue to be described in ways that let power-over hierarchies control public resources. Until we talk about communion based on love, those power-over hierarchies will continue to drive our activities. And that's what I see happening in these organizations. It happened in my own life in those years at Illinois where the organization rewarded me and owned me to the point that I lost my soul. It happened in Extension over the past seventy-five or one hundred years, where the dominant view of the land-grant mission has become using knowledge to make money, even though that can be completely destructive of people's lives, of communities and the earth.

I truly love the idea and the ideal of public service, and I truly believe that we can heal the planet. I don't know if we have enough time. What I worry about is time. I don't know if we in the land-grant system are going to be given enough leeway to muddle ourselves back to a place of public purpose. We move forward three steps and back two. That's how change happens. I don't know if the land-grant system can change fast enough to survive. If it doesn't, something else will emerge. If the land-grant system dissolves and is fragmented, and we become owned by industry and power-over politics, something else will emerge in its place, and that's fine. It's a shame, but it'll happen. So what I worry about is time.

What I have hope about is a bit of a cliché. It's the young people that are surrounding me now, who have the ideas and the ideals. They're reinventing a new way of being together on the planet and in the institution. I am surrounded by young people that get it. They understand sustainability, they understand public service, they understand love of the earth, they understand love of each other. They're trying to create social systems to allow themselves to live their lives in a different way. And I get to be part of that. It's not something that I have to force on an institution in crisis. It's something that's being demanded by young people who are scared and concerned and have hope, and haven't turned to cynicism. So everything that I've been able to do in my classroom has

been driven by the needs of students who express these hopes and values. And heck, you know, it's all the same stuff, about building community and building connectivity with the earth. All the same stuff. And there's a demand for it. So I have hope.

Afterword

Five years after this interview, I'm still teaching undergraduate students at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Interest in my courses continues to grow as the global crisis in resource depletion, hunger and poverty, land degradation, and fossil fuel dependence have become more widely recognized. I've added several new courses, including one called Sustainable Living that attracted thirty students when first offered, and after four years was capped at three hundred. I advise many students (who perhaps, like me, "don't fit" neatly in the university system) through a program that allows them to create their own majors. I serve on the Board of Directors of Living Routes, an innovative educational program that gives university credit for students who study sustainability by living and learning in one of the many Ecovillages on the planet.

And although I pay little personal attention to the work done around the still much-needed transformation of the academy, I know this important work continues. My brother, who sent me critical literature when I was in Australia, now chairs a major university committee on Academic Outreach dedicated to helping the institution become more relevant in a rapidly changing world. And the healing continues. I see the pain and confusion experienced by individuals, families, communities, states and nations, and perhaps even the biosphere as a breeding ground for change. If asked, I'm willing to share my own story of moving from pain to joy, and from confusion to fulfillment, as an example of hope in a world much in need of healing.

About the Author

- Dr. John M. Gerber is Professor of Plant Sciences and Sustainability Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He is a member of the Board of Directors of Living Routes, Inc., an educational collaborative that helps students earn college credit for the study and practice of sustainable living in Ecovillages around the world. He also serves as chairperson of his local town Conservation Commission. He has served as Executive Director of the Consortium for Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education, a national consortium of universities and research institutes, and is a founding Board member of the Loka Institute, a nonprofit institute dedicated to the democratization

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Dr. Gerber's research interests include ecological cropping systems, plant nutrition, and seed and flowering physiology. He is former Extension Division Vice President of the American Society for Horticultural Science, and former President of the National Agricultural Plastics Association. He has written and lectured nationally and internationally on participatory research and education, the integration of research and extension education, and the role of citizen input in land-grant universities. John currently focuses on teaching at the University of Massachusetts where he is active in helping to create a new undergraduate program in Sustainable Food and Farming Systems. He continues to investigate ways in which students are encouraged to explore personal growth and community responsibility through service, dialogue, meditation, and contemplation.