

Scholarship from Northern Wisconsin: An Analysis of Efforts to Promote Scholarship in the University of Wisconsin's Cooperative Extension Field-Based Staff

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Abstract

Utilizing results drawn from a survey of extension field-based staff from northern Wisconsin, the author examines the role of scholarship for county-level extension staff. This article argues that if the challenge of campus academicians is to become more engaged with civil society, the challenge for extension staff is the opposite: to engage and embrace scholarly work as part of their mission. Analysis of a recent survey of University of Wisconsin Northern District field staff led to the conclusion that field staff value scholarship but need to enhance their skills and opportunities in applied research, writing, and presenting. As public universities seek to re-engage their campus faculty in the larger community, they should draw on their most engaged members—field-based staff. Cooperative Extension's faculty and staff can contribute to meeting the needs of the people of their state and beyond, not only by the specific work they do in their communities, but also by adding to the larger base of knowledge through their scholarship.

Introduction

If the challenge to land-grant universities and other major universities in the United States is to turn from narrowly focused research and campus teaching to engagement and outreach, Extension's challenge for county-based faculty is almost the opposite: to engage and embrace scholarly work as part of their mission. The forces that have driven major university campus academicians to more narrowly focus on research agendas, which may be unrelated to perceived community needs, have also affected extension staff in the field.

Field-based extension staff, it is argued here, are probably disconnected from the activities of many state land-grant campuses. They in fact may view the campus in much the same light that their clientele and the general citizenry do. That is, a "perception that, despite the resources and expertise available on our campuses, our institutions are not well organized to bring them to bear on local

problems in a coherent way” (*Kellogg Commission 1999, Executive Summary*). Field-based extension staff may see scholarly work as merely another set of bureaucratic requirements to the job, not as essentially part of the job. One colleague has shared that many faculty in the field chide each other with, “Are you doing scholarly work now or real work?” This anecdotal observation does not speak for all field-based extension staff, but it does reflect a common attitude.

Boyer, in his Carnegie Foundation reports, expanded the notion of scholarship to include engagement as part of teaching and research (*Boyer 1990, 16*). For those in extension field work, this was a welcome

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message because it spoke of the need to convey findings appropriately and to ask questions and listen to responses in such a way as to help set the teaching and research agenda. Boyer’s scholarship of application is one way that Extension purports to work. When the scholarship of application is a two-way street, it is in service to the institution and society.

The University of Wisconsin is a statewide system of which Extension forms a separate institution. If the University of Wisconsin and other great universities are being challenged to reassert their role of outreach or public service, then Extension should also ask its staff to understand and assert their role in teaching and research in an appropriate way that is recognized as scholarly.

The University of Wisconsin Extension has always valued scholarly work as part of the role of an extension faculty and academic staff member. UWEX Cooperative Extension grants tenure with ranks of associate professor and professor for its county-based faculty. Historically, it has been necessary for extension faculty to demonstrate some scholarly work within the vita document, under the research and publications section in order to achieve this goal. More recently, UWEX Cooperative Extension has changed the requirements and process for granting tenure. Many of the new requirements take their direction from Oregon State University’s notion of scholarship.

In UWEX Cooperative Extension’s *Articles of Governance* this understanding of the role of scholarship was clearly spelled out in

its September 1997 version: “The effectiveness of the educational programs of the University of Wisconsin depends on the scholarship of its faculty.” The articles also state: “Scholarship is creative, intellectual work that is reviewed by the scholar’s peers who affirm its value, and is added to our intellectual history through its communication” (*University of Wisconsin Extension 2001, H.b.7*). Like the OSU model, these guidelines place a premium on validation and communication when considering work to be truly scholarship.

In Wisconsin there has been considerable discussion of and support for moving UWEX’s faculty toward a more scholarly approach to their work. In 2000, the secretary of the faculty, the chair and vice chair of the University Committee, and the provost and vice chancellor exhorted the academic department chairs to share examples of scholarly work and forums as a way to assist faculty and staff. As they said, “Our goal, however, should be to have the rigorous, inquisitive approach of the scholar pervade all aspects of our work in a way that strengthens our educational service to our clients” (*Attig 2000*). The purpose of this article is to examine the role of regional scholarship forums and the scholarship needs of county-based faculty.

Northern District Scholarship Conference

The purpose of the Northern District Scholarship Conference was to highlight and promote the scholarship of Cooperative Extension in northern Wisconsin. Fifteen scholarly presentations took place as part of the program. Prior to the presentations, the vice chancellor and provost, the secretary of the faculty, and the chair of the University Committee all spoke on the issue of scholarship by the faculty and staff of UWEX. These keynote presentations not only explained the Cooperative Extension mandate to do scholarly work; they also provided a vision of scholarship as a part of Extension’s work.

The University of Wisconsin Extension Northern District is located in the northern thirteen counties of Wisconsin, a sparsely populated rural area of the state that is dominated by lakes and woods. Today the district is composed of approximately seventy education professionals. There are thirteen county extension offices, staff on two tribal reservations, an area business agent, staff located at the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center (a federal environmental visitor center), and staff at two research stations. Additionally, there are approximately eight extension specialists at the University of Wisconsin Superior campus. A 1994 tribal land-grant college,

Lac Courte Oreilles Community College, is also located in northern Wisconsin.

The planning committee established six broad themes under which staff were invited to submit proposals.

- Videos as educational tools. This examined the process of film-making, distribution of videos, how videos enhance programming, and how they are used as teaching tools. Not a session to principally air videos this was rather an analysis of videos as educational tools.
- Technology in teaching and learning. This covered the use of technology in Extension today. What methods and techniques were being used? How effective were they, and when is one method more appropriate than others?
- Bringing generations together. This explored programs that bring generations together or touch a variety of groups. Youth leadership, grandparenting, teen court, and mentoring programs were examples.
- Natural resource issues. Across program areas staff deal with natural resource-related issues. Land use, forestry, community decision making, water quality, and food quality and safety were examples.
- Communities. The quality of life in communities is enhanced through many extension-related initiatives. Sustainable communities, youth entrepreneurship, small business education, and managing family incomes were examples.
- Excellence in applied research and analysis. This was meant to cover excellent scholarship not covered under the broad themes. The theme title was later changed to applied research and analysis.

The review committee received twenty-five submittals from approximately sixty staff members. Of these, fifteen were accepted. Each presenter was given twenty to thirty minutes for the presentation and questions and answers. It should be noted that broad themes were used that would deliberately cut across program lines to ensure that some mixing of program ideas and insights would occur.

Scholarship survey results: Following the conference, a survey document was sent to the staff to explore their assessment of the conference and scholarship issues in general. At the time of the conference there were fifty-seven members on the Northern District staff. These individuals received the survey. The campus-based specialists at the University of Wisconsin Superior and the LCO

Community College staff did not receive copies. The survey was delivered two ways: in person at the next District all staff in-service and by mail to those that did not attend the in-service.

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Of the fifty-seven surveys sent out, thirty-six responses were completed and returned, or 63 percent. Nothing is known about the characteristics of those that responded versus those that did not. That is, no follow-up was done to determine whether a particular program area, office, or length of service was not represented.

The results provide insights on the value of scholarship forums and scholarship perceptions in field-based extension staff. Dr. Ellen Taylor-Powell, UWEX evaluation specialist, assisted in the formulation of the questions and the general survey implementation strategy. However, the implementation and analysis are the responsibility of the author alone.

- Fourteen questions were asked on the evaluation. There was also a space for general comments. Results of each question are shared below. The first ten questions used a scale of 1 to 5: 1 Strongly Disagree, 2 Disagree, 3 Neutral, 4 Agree, 5 Strongly Agree. The responses of Strongly Disagree and Disagree are consolidated as one as are Strongly Agree and Agree.
- The Northern District Scholarship Forum was a valuable way for me to learn more about Extension Educational Programs: 84 percent Strongly Agreed or Agreed, while 16 percent were neutral. There were no Disagree or Strongly Disagree.
- The Presenters at the Northern District Scholarship Forum provided good examples how individuals in the county-based positions can do scholarship: 70 percent Strongly Agreed or Agreed, 17 percent were Neutral, and 13 percent Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed.
- Scholarship is an important part of my work: 68 percent Strongly Agreed or Agreed, 18 percent were Neutral, and 15 percent Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed.
- I feel confident that I can do scholarly work: 73 percent Strongly Agreed or Agreed, 15 percent were Neutral, and 9 percent Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed.

- I have received sufficient training in scholarship to develop my scholarly work: 51 percent Strongly Agreed or Agreed, 21 percent were Neutral, and 27 percent Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed.
- I have been given sufficient opportunity to develop my scholarly work: 45 percent Strongly Agreed or Agreed, 30 percent were Neutral, and 24 percent Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed.
- I have been given sufficient opportunity to present my scholarly work: 60 percent Strongly Agreed or Agreed, 27 percent were Neutral, and 12 percent Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed.
- It is the responsibility of the Extension staff member to develop and seek out opportunities to share scholarship: 66 percent Strongly Agreed or Agreed, 18 percent were Neutral, and 12 percent Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed.
- It is the responsibility of Extension to develop and seek out opportunities for staff to share scholarship: 57 percent Strongly Agreed or Agreed, 29 percent were Neutral, and 14 percent Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed.
- Our scholarly work is recognized as an important component of our overall work: 58 percent Strongly Agreed or Agreed, 29 percent were Neutral, and 14 percent Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed.
- Since joining Extension I have presented at a scholarship-type conference ____ (how many) times: Mean Response 1.76, Mode Response zero (14), and Range zero to seven.
- Since joining Extension I have had ____ (number) scholarly-type publications accepted by peer-reviewed groups: Mean Response .92, Mode Response zero (21), and Range zero to seven.
- If answered yes to 11 and 12 why did you present or submit your work? If you have not, why not? Yes: Typical reasons for presenting or submitting included needed for promotion, a nice opportunity to share, and was asked to. No: Although not totaled, typical reasons for not presenting or submitting included not enough time or not a high priority in my county.

“The scholarship forum was seen by most as a valuable method for sharing and learning more about extension educational programs.”

- General Data on Respondents: Program Area: Family Living-9, 4H Youth Development-10, Agriculture and Natural Resources-4, Community Resource Development-10, and Other-1. Tenure Track Position: Yes 24, or No 12. If in a Tenure Track Position, have you received tenure: Yes 13, No 6.

Scholarship survey analysis: Some conclusions can be suggested about the responses from this one-district survey. It is clear that most staff members value scholarship and do see it as part of their ongoing work responsibilities as a university staff member. It is not as clear that all feel equally well supported or capable of conducting scholarly work.

- Most staff members see scholarship as an important part of their work. They feel somewhat confident (70%) that they can do scholarly work.
- The scholarship forum was seen by most as a valuable method for sharing and learning more about extension educational programs. This fulfills a prime motivator for scholarship: “It is important that faculty communicate their work and add to the existing body of intellectual history” (University of Wisconsin Extension 2001, Appendix I.B). There is a mixed opinion on whose responsibility it is to develop spaces and opportunities for scholarship. Approximately equal numbers saw it as the individual’s responsibility and as Extension’s.
- Significantly, there was not agreement on whether staff had been given sufficient opportunities to develop their scholarly work. Less than half thought they had sufficient opportunity to develop their scholarly work. This could reflect “overfilled plate” or that scholarship is not a priority for any of the myriad of clientele or local stakeholders involved with UWEX field-based staff.
- Most believed there was insufficient training to do scholarly work. The framework for conducting scholarship, UWEX style, the use of research techniques, and scholarly writing or presentations may not be apparent to all staff. All extension field-based faculty are on tenure track appointments and come to their jobs with a master’s degree. There are a half-dozen academic staff members working on their master’s degree, as well as several who are not required to obtain a master’s. As a consequence, some staff members may not have received training in research or scholarship-type analysis, writing, or presentations.

- Overall, there is a concern that their scholarship will not be recognized or appreciated. This might reflect the local realities of extension work. Much like the point made above: local constituencies might not value this aspect of the work. The job of extension leaders, then, might be to explain the value to local stakeholders.
- Most staff members had presented at a “scholarship-type conference.” The type of conference was not further identified, so “program sharing” may have been considered by many as meeting the criterion.
- Even though most had at least presented once at a “scholarship-type” conference, fourteen of the thirty-four respondents to this question had not: 41 percent. This is a high percentage.
- Very few extension staff had presented a written paper for a peer-reviewed or scholarly-type publication. Only thirteen of the respondents or 38 percent had ever prepared a written paper and 62 percent had never done so. Note that 64 percent of the respondents were in tenure-track positions, so this number of respondents is quite low.

A wide variety of written comments were received. The following examples of the most salient comments are organized around the motivations behind doing scholarship, the value of scholarship, and suggestions for strengthening scholarship forum-type events.

Motivations:

“Scholarship is required for promotion.”

“I presented because of arm-twisting by my District Director.”

“At this point my focus is on the county and its best interests.”

“The majority, if not all of my work, is developed and presented to local folks and not in scholarship types of settings—so I haven’t prepared things for publications.”

“I am too busy at my job (to submit work for scholarly review and presentations or publications).”

“An excellent opportunity to share with my colleagues.”

Value of Scholarship Events:

“We need opportunities to present our work.”

“These types of programs are some of the best uses of our time—we need to do this on a regular basis.”

“This should be repeated every few years.”

Suggestions for Strengthening Scholarship:

“Not everything we do is scholarship. Not everything last year fit the criteria of scholarship.”

“How about sponsoring a Northern District scholarship issues publication that is ‘peer-reviewed’.”

“In depth scholarship sharing is more a Department/Program responsibility.”

“Scholarship seems like such an abstract concept—why not just refer to it as program sharing?”

Conclusions

The University of Wisconsin Extension field staff value scholarship and have a growing appreciation for how to engage in it and specifically the role scholarship plays in UWEX’s mission and values. However, work needs to be done to increase the confidence and skills of the extension field-based staff as scholars.

Staff valued the Northern District Scholarship Forum. It served as a way to promote scholarship, celebrate it (Wisconsin-style, as put by Lee Cunningham, former chair of the University Committee), role model scholarship, and to actually provide training in scholarship.

Training is needed to help faculty and staff fulfill their scholarship role as university professionals. Training and orientation are provided to new colleagues on the tenure process and writing program impact statements. But little or no training has been provided to staff on how to write scholarly papers or how to be most successful in submitting oral or written work for review and eventual publication. It is assumed that most faculty come to the institution with these skills or that they will develop this capacity during the normal course of doing their work. This assumption needs to be rethought. The very high number of survey respondents that did not have any experience in writing for a scholarly-type publication was alarming. This is an area where special emphasis should be made, in terms of both opportunities and training.

One excellent way to provide training and opportunities for staff is to host scholarship-type events. One concern raised in the survey was whether the Northern District staff, with its membership of fifty-seven, constituted a large enough body to support holding scholarship events. Perhaps the sessions could be combined by districts or held less frequently.

The university could also help provide opportunities for staff to pursue their scholarly work. Is staff regularly encouraged to submit papers and presentations for national meetings, the *Journal of Extension*, or regional forums? One survey respondent questioned the appropriateness of administration leading this effort. She expressed the belief that the tasks were best left to the academic departments of Extension. Whatever the most effective source of support, this is an important divisional value and resources should be directed to completing this goal. A goal of the division is to offer an opportunity for all cooperative extension staff to share their scholarly work by 2003 (*UWEX Cooperative Extension Division 2000, 2*).

Local stakeholders may not necessarily value the more arcane aspects of doing scholarly work, even though they appreciate the need to bring cutting-edge research to the local populace. Based on some of the comments from the Northern District staff not all

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the staff, accepts scholarship as an important part of Extension’s work at the county level. Extension leaders should explain the role of scholarship in the work of its staff.

For a number of respondents, being personally invited or encouraged to submit work for a scholarship event was the

most significant reason they did so. Extension leaders need to model and encourage their staff to undertake scholarship communication.

Finally, regional forums or programs can serve as springboards for greater understanding and greater participation in scholarship. For some Northern District staff the regional forum was the first time they shared creative, intellectual work that was reviewed by peers who affirmed its value. At least four of the submittals for this district event were later presented at larger professional conferences that were also peer reviewed.

As the public universities, particularly those with a land-grant mission, seek to re-engage their campus faculty in the larger community they serve, they should also draw on their most engaged staff—that is, field-based staff. Cooperative Extension’s faculty and staff can contribute to meeting the needs of the people of their state and beyond, not only by the specific work they do in their communities, but also by adding to the larger base of knowledge through their scholarship.

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About the Author

Mr. Preissing currently serves as the District Director for University of Wisconsin Extension's Northern District. The District is a large, sparsely populated rural area. Prior to assuming the director role, Preissing worked for eight years as the community resource development agent for the University of Wisconsin Extension-Burnett County, where his work focused on business and economic development, tourism education, land use planning, and lake management. Before Extension that author worked overseas for seven years with the US Peace Corps and Catholic Relief Services in Latin America. He has a masters degree in agriculture economics from the University of Kentucky and a bachelor's degree in political science from Northern Illinois University.