

Engagement: It's about Them

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Abstract

"It's about Them" was introduced by David Hardesty to call attention to the central focus of effective public engagement. The seven-part test of engagement set forth by the Kellogg Commission is examined within the context of the cooperative extension system. The impacts of the changes that will shape American society in the early twenty-first century are considered. Current examples of extension programming that meet the seven-part test are presented. Finally, the appropriate application of the seven-part test to the four base program areas of extension is considered.

Perceptions regarding what extension is are changing as extension moves toward transformational learning that is high in both content and process. Transformational learning that connects citizens to the resources of the total university will be the future for extension. Does extension have the ability to convert from the independent expert model to an interdependent engaged twenty-first century organization?

Introduction

During the 2003 National Extension Directors and Administrators meeting, David Hardesty, president of West Virginia University, defined engagement as "It's about Them." President Hardesty typifies university presidents across the nation who values the recommendations of the *Returning to Our Roots* report (*Kellogg Commission 2001*) for the potential of strengthening their institutions. Does extension have the courage to convert from the independent expert model to an interdependent engaged twenty-first century organization?

Focusing on "them" defines what makes the land-grant universities a system of public higher education connected to the needs of the state. The basic philosophy of extension is the use of public dollars for the public good. The mission of extension is to enhance the public good by putting knowledge to work for

economic and community development that results in an improved quality of life for all citizens of a state. Extension organizations are currently examining the meaning of engagement as it relates to their culture and institutional priorities.

Engagement means genuine listening to people, either across campus or across the state, for the purpose of solving complex societal problems. It means building partnerships within the institution across the functions of teaching, research, and outreach, among an array of academic units to connect with the everyday lives of people. Engagement is transformational learning that focuses academic resources on complex issues of the state such as transportation, land use, and property tax reform.

The Future for Extension

Extension engages citizens in a process of lifelong learning applied to a wide array of content areas. Merrill Ewert (*McDowell 2001, 172*) challenged extension to think of programs as a matrix of process versus content (*McDowell 2001*). Extension education focuses on four components: service, content transmission, facilitation, and transformational learning. Service is low process and low content, such as soil testing with no educational component. Content transmission is low process but high content or what is commonly referred to as technology transfer, where a question

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such as how to correct a laundry problem receives an answer. Facilitation is high process and low content; it is frequently used in public policy training, where volunteers learn to be more effective members of town boards and commissions. Transformational learning is high content and high process that occurs when people struggle with solving their problems such as how

will their town “look” in ten years and what actions might be taken to direct the future course of development. Engagement and the resulting scholarship of outreach occur when process and content are both high, as in transformational learning. How will

this movement toward expanded transformational learning be assessed by citizens involved with extension?

What will extension be in 2015? Will there be greater engagement across the university with citizens and, if so, how will that occur? Will extension employees participate in more e-meetings, partner with what now may be perceived as competitors, develop self-directed learning materials, or serve as a community catalyst? Will extension be only a provider of technical information or engaged in transformational learning? In many states, these issues are currently evolving.

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How extension will enhance the outreach mission of land-grant institutions in the future is a function of engagement and the resulting scholarship of outreach, as defined by Boyer's work *Scholarship Reconsidered*. Boyer based the scholarship of discovery, integration, application, and teaching on four criteria. These criteria for new knowledge were that it be validated by peer review, communicated to a greater audience, recognized, and used by others. In extension, the high content and high process of transformational learning results in scholarship.

Action Taken to Move into the Twenty-First Century

In 2001, to address the challenge of engagement and to develop the scholarship of extension, the national extension system appointed a nineteen-member task force, of which nine members were university leaders not affiliated with extension. The task force was to formulate a vision for extension that considered the impact of changing demographics, advances in technology, and societal changes. The resulting document, *A Vision for the 21st Century (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy 2002)*, examined challenges facing extension in the future, the application of the Kellogg Commission's seven guiding characteristics of engagement for extension, and recommendations for states and the national system.

Current challenges, as defined in *A Vision for the 21st Century*, that face the traditional technical expert extension model include:

- the changing face of America,
- globalization,
- community capacity and vitality,
- communities of interest and place,
- information technology, and
- crises, risks, and uncertainty.

What might be the impact of each of these for moving extension to a more engaged model based on transformational learning?

The *face of America* is changing from aging, rural or suburban, native-born, white and black to a new face of young, urban or suburban, and multicultural. Extension is a diverse system of various types of institutions, all of whom work within the political, economic, and societal climate of the state to reflect the ever-changing generational, social, and ethnic diversity of the state. While not a new concept, the challenge of increasing diversity has never been greater.

Globalization means that unrelated decisions and events occur with rapid and profound impacts. Time-honored rules of business have been altered with local implications and consequences for an interdependent world. The challenge for extension is to honor the accomplishments of partners, and to think globally while acting locally.

The maintenance and development of *community capacity and vitality* are critical as communities experience the loss of economic vitality, infrastructure, political power, tax base, and investment capital in both urban and rural areas. Sprawl in suburban areas changes land use patterns, resulting in a new community context. Extension programs thrive when holistic thinking is used to address social and economic issues that result in strengthening the local community.

Communities of interest and place are where people live, work, and play, as well as where people who have common interests gather. The challenge for extension is to support healthy communities of place while capitalizing on communities of interest.

Information technology allows extension programs to be a true mix of high tech and high touch. Programs should stimulate

active learning, critical thinking, and problem solving. To effectively involve all interested parties, find resources, and encourage early adopters while thinking outside the proverbial box will more clearly define extension programs in the future.

Crises, risks, and uncertainty coupled with public uneasiness and insecurity have become commonplace. The challenge for extension is to think critically, communicate clearly, and act decisively while promoting public understanding. An atmosphere of open and honest deliberation is first created at the community level.

To thrive in the twenty-first century, universities are seeking ways to engage citizens in such a manner as to overcome everyday challenges. Engagement occurs when the faces of the state are reflected in programs and personnel; when the organization supports shared leadership, and employees are trained in the concepts of engagement; and when seeking nontraditional revenue streams is rewarded. The complex problems found in most aspects of life are best resolved in local communities where extension has a presence.

Extension is a living, evolving, market-driven organization. How extension fully utilizes the unique capacities of the institution to engage the public, recognizes the accomplishments of partners, and moves from a service and technical expert orientation to transformational learning will ultimately define its future.

The seven guiding characteristics of engagement first proposed by the Kellogg Commission (2001) are one tool to move extension to the future. These characteristics address the extent of full engagement for extension across the university and with communities. The guiding characteristics are responsiveness, respect for partners, academic neutrality, accessibility, integration, coordination, and resource partnership. Each of the seven characteristics for the successful engagement of citizens in complex local problems will be defined (*Extension Committee on Organization and Policy 2002*).

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- *Responsiveness*: Extension, through its network of community-based centers and offices, connects people with ideas and concepts that result in real change.
- *Respect for partners*: Sustaining new partnerships requires sharing credit for accomplishments as well as the equitable use of fiscal and human resources.
- *Academic neutrality*: The mission of extension, to enable people to improve their lives and communities through learning partnerships that put knowledge to work, can be sustained only in an atmosphere of academic neutrality. This neutrality allows people to make informed choices that work for their local situation.
- *Accessibility*: Extension's presence in local communities provides convenient accessibility to the knowledge and expertise that reside within the land-grant university system. The Internet has changed accessibility and how people seek and access information. Quality information based on research is needed to make sustained changes in communities.
- *Integration*: The needs and challenges faced by individuals and communities neither segregate along discipline lines nor conform to the hierarchical structure of universities. Engagement means being the mechanism to listen to real needs and then to reach across the institution to bring resources to problems.
- *Coordination*: Extension has a history of coordinating a myriad of programs and activities. Emerging complex local issues require critical and creative thinking. A county-based extension educator might bring together university-based programs in landscape architecture, turf management, pest management, and aquatic pathology with a local watershed association, homeowners, and town officials to address the problem of a lake fish kill.
- *Resource partnerships*: Full engagement implies an expectation that all partners have fiscal, human, or intellectual resources to contribute toward possible solutions. A county-based extension educator might bring an idea and fiscal resources to a campus-based faculty member to support the work of a graduate student conducting applied research.

When a program is evaluated against the seven characteristics, the complexity of meeting all seven steps of engagement is better understood. For any given program, focusing on the tools of engagement provides the structure for evolving the complex thinking needed to solve tomorrow's problems. Part of the structure is how the voices of people are heard and valued in the engagement process.

A new hammer can make everything start to look like a nail. Like any tool, the hammer works perfectly for some things, but is only adequate for others. The concepts of engagement should not be applied to all programs. There are programs where the concepts can be applied with great success. Engagement is about connecting with people, creating respect and trust, being accessible, identifying and utilizing community-based resources, drawing on the university's resources, and involving partners.

The North Dakota Rural Leadership Model

To better understand the seven guiding characteristics, an analysis of a program measured against the seven characteristics is needed. While there are a number of state and national extension leadership programs, Rural Leadership North Dakota (RLND) is a university-wide two-year program for North Dakota citizens who want to make a difference in their community and/or organization. RLND's mission is to prepare and develop effective leaders to strengthen rural communities. The goals of the program are to create a network of people, strengthen participants' skills, improve the quality of life for participants and their organization or community, and prepare participants to work with and implement a project. The performance of RLND is measured against the seven characteristics to determine the extent of engagement.

Responsiveness: The essence of the RLND program came from communities expressing their concerns to the NDSU Extension Service, State Board of Agriculture Research and Education members (SBARE), NDSU, and state legislators. The concern focused on the lack of people willing to assume leadership roles and the resulting leadership void in communities. Needs expressed were for new leaders to work with existing leaders; to assume responsibility; and to create opportunities for North Dakotans in their twenties and thirties to hold leadership positions and to receive leadership training. Starting in 2001, Dr. Joseph Chapman, president of NDSU, and Sharon Anderson,

director, NDSU Extension Service, worked together with the SBARE to respond.

Respect for Partners: The RLND program has a fourteen member board of directors, with each board member representing an organization that is partnering with RLND. These include the ND Association of Counties, Association of Rural Electric Cooperatives, Department of Commerce, Legislative Assembly, League of Cities, and Job Development Authorities. A ten-member design team, working on the seminar curriculum, has functioned as a true listening team making decisions that respect the needs and interests of all. Additional partners include the NDSU Colleges of Business, Education, Sociology, and Continuing Education (<http://www.ag.ndsu.nodak.edu/rlnd>).

Academic neutrality: Inherent in the RLND curriculum is academic neutrality. Effective leaders seek out information on all sides of an issue to increase their understanding. Various aspects of an issue are presented to participants to broaden and challenge their thinking and decision-making processes. RLND partici-

pants are asked to research and present information on various topics that present opportunities for new learning and deeper understanding.

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Accessibility: RLND participants are individuals who want to continue to learn about themselves, their organizations, their community, state, nation, and world. These are individuals who invest time and energy into the program, who are open to broadening their perspectives,

and who want to create the conditions for North Dakota to grow and prosper. Faculty from across the institution are involved in planning and teaching. As the positive public perception of RLND grows, more faculty members are becoming involved.

Integration: Faculty members participate in various seminars, sharing their expertise with the RLND participants and listening to the dialogue among the participants. This two-way communication builds understanding and appreciation. Faculty and staff work with participants on their community or organizational projects to make “real-time” connections that integrate research

with application. Over time, new research projects and the resulting scholarship will evolve.

Coordination: The RLND program works with numerous entities across the university and the state to bring a broad spectrum of expertise to complex local problems.

Resource Partnerships: The NDSU president is currently funding the RLND program director position, and the Extension Service is funding the office budget and a half-time administrative secretary. Other partners contribute their time by serving on either the board of directors or the design team. These partners have indicated their willingness to support the RLND program by sponsoring a seminar meal, providing the seminar meeting room, or contributing financially to the program.

The Potential for Other Extension Programs

Although the RLND program appears to meet the seven guiding characteristics, the long-term impact of the program for transformational learning is yet to be assessed.

Would extension programs in other content areas, when analyzed against the engagement model, also lead to transformational learning? Engagement is about changing perceptions both internally and externally. It is about converting the extension mindset from the concept of transmitting content from the county agent to the client, into a model of engagement as equal partners in the solving of complex problems. Engagement is extending the extension process beyond the traditional base of programs to effectively integrate the greater institution and the state.

To conduct an analysis, several current perceptions need to be addressed. Extension will need to rigorously examine whether people regard the organization as a partner or as only an independent expert provider of technical information. Do citizens perceive the local extension office as a place to have a question answered or a place to effect community change? The traditional technical expert focus may have caused extension to drift from the early foundation of transformational learning.

Extension has traditionally worked in four program areas: agriculture and natural resources, family and consumer sciences, 4-H youth development, and community resources and economic development. The four base programs might be the organization's Achilles heel of the future if these program areas create the

perception of limited content without a high degree of process. Were this to happen, extension might errantly focus on only the service component as opposed to a balance with content transmission and facilitation leading to the ultimate goal of transformational learning based on engagement. Can current extension program areas integrate the concepts of engagement, and in so doing, serve as a catalyst to effect change in local communities through transformational learning?

The current balance between the technical expert model and the engagement model is examined for each of the four traditional program areas.

- In agriculture and natural resources programs, the expert model is deeply ingrained and works well. The complex issues of land use offer an opportunity for programs to be guided by the seven characteristics of engagement.
- In the family and consumer sciences programs, there are examples of both the expert model working well, as in the Family and Community Education Program, and the engagement of community agencies in providing support for a unique target audience.
- In 4-H youth development programs, volunteer leadership is developed and content is transmitted. The engagement model is being developed in technology-based programs as resources are shared and partnerships of adults and youths evolve.
- In community resources and economic development programs, there is a mix of both the expert and the engagement models.

Community resources and economic development programs offer unique opportunities for meaningful public engagement resulting in transformational learning.

One example of a strong engagement model starts with the premise that the staff of the local extension office can assist in the development of the community. The county extension educator considers the strength of the local leadership base. Leaders are acquainted with the capacity of their land-grant university as a partner. A shared vision is created for what can happen, resulting in a road map for progress that includes the seven guiding characteristics. Then the real work of effective community change begins.

One example of a community development engagement process occurred in Lorain County, Ohio. The local economy was built on heavy industry that was fading under the pressure of the global economy. With 30 percent of the jobs in manufacturing and an eroding manufacturing job base, the need for change was evident. Under extension's initiation, more than six hundred local citizens studied and developed options for the county's future. Partnerships were forged between selected components of the existing manufacturing and "digital"-based sectors of the economy. University personnel partnered with the county commissioners, the local community college, and the chamber of commerce in developing and delivering programs. The commissioners committed \$1.9 million over five years toward the effort. Local industry provided support, and the community college offered engineering and computer science degree programs in conjunction with other four-year state universities. One major effort incorporated education and phased in continued assistance as the business or industry grew. This is a strong example of responsiveness, respect, accessibility, coordination, integration, academic neutrality, and resource partnership being used to address a complex local problem.

Other examples of engagement include Alabama's annual Rural-Urban Interface Conference, South Carolina's Non-Profit Education Initiative, Connecticut's Non-Point (source pollution) Education for Municipal Officials (NEMO), Pennsylvania's food safety certification program, and Access Minnesota Main Street (AMMS). The future challenge is to develop a means to measure the impact from increased engagement for both the institution and the local community.

Summary

When the local community comes to regard extension as an actively engaged partner who integrates the university to address local complex problems, rather than a place to get specific information, then the guiding characteristics of engagement are being met. When extension faculty members implement programs that increase content and process in order to engage in transformational learning, then the future for extension is being created. Moving toward true models of engagement and transformational learning takes time and new skills. Does extension have the courage to become a twenty-first-century engaged organization? Only the future will tell if extension truly believes that "It's about Them."

For more information log on to <<http://www.extvision21.org>>.

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