The Globalized Extension System – Information is Global; Engagement is Local

Jerold R. Thomas
District Director and Co-Interim Program Leader, Comm. Development
Ohio State University Extension
1219 West Main Cross
Findlay, OH 44820 USA
Ph: 419.422.6106
Fax: 419.422.7595
thomas.69@osu.edu

Daney Jackson
Associate Director, Penn State Cooperative Extension
217 Ag Administration Building
University Park, PA 16802 USA
Ph: 814.863.3438
dgj3@psu.edu

Abstract

We explore current trends that are forcing a restructuring of Extension Systems. These include a move to a new economy, technology, and organizational changes. We believe that for Extension Systems to be viable they will need to produce more local engagement and information. Serving as a router of centralized information is no longer a feasible option. Specific implications discussed include: disintermediation, engagement, the scholarship of Extension, specialization of educators and developing a portfolio of relationships.
Introduction

Extension efforts based at land grant institutions have long discussed the efficacy of moving toward a university wide systems versus a system based on a handful of traditional agriculturally related colleges. Many land grant institutions have also recently started to tout outreach and engagement missions. We argue that Extension services are no longer simply a delivery system for a specific land grant institution, but rather engage with local clientele, conduct applied research, and find resources and information from a wide geographic scope of sources.

We use the U. S. Extension Service as a starting point, and then build to include the need and ability for globalized information sharing. In reality, with the right infrastructure, information has become globalized.

Theoretical Base

Key societal trends are driving changes in the U.S. Cooperative Extension System. Long seen as an information providing service that “brought the University to the people”, Extension now finds itself coping with life in the information age. In an age where data becomes a cheap commodity, people have an increased number of choices on where to go to get data and information. Data in general refers to the “raw” facts that are available. Information infers some value added to the data – a level of interpretation or advice is added to the data. For example, yield information from a test plot is data until someone adds value to it by interpreting the numbers or providing implications and recommendations.

Until relatively recently, data and especially information were limited. You needed to go somewhere (or perhaps call someone) to get either. Specific clientele visited or contacted Extension offices for data and information. Some of that data was generated locally, but much came from a centralized land grant institution. By definition, a local office was an “Extension” of the University.

The 1990’ ushered in the start of several changes in society, the economy, and technology have altered the Extension system in the U.S. These major trends are discussed below.

A move to a New Economy

This refers to a restructuring of the economy around technology, reorganization of the workplace, and globalization. All help to exert structural changes in the economy and limit inflationary pressure. Technology, more so than globalization, also forces a restructuring of the workforce.

While many futurists have noted this phenomenon and its effect on manufacturing industries (a downsizing of the amount of labor needed, an increase in the capital and amount of information that goes into the product, and an increase in production), this has been occurring
in agriculture for some time. Agriculture can make a solid argument for being the original information intensive industry. Total numbers of actual production farmers continue to drop in the U.S. while production volume has increased. This has led to an interesting dilemma. While there are fewer production farm clientele for Extension to work with, the demands for research and information have continued to rise.

**Technological Changes**

Changes in technology – specifically the use of computers and the transformation to the Internet and the World Wide Web – have greatly altered how information and data are shared and distributed. This has led to a choice society where people are given more choices and opportunities about where they may obtain information.

Moving into the 21st Century, additional technologies like Personal Digital Assistants, wireless technologies, cell phones, and general pervasive use of computers have increased this phenomenon.

This moves society towards a situation where at least data becomes available on an in demand basis. It does mean that the data becomes information or that it is accurate – long a pledge of Extension organizations.

A gap has existed in where and how the Internet and other communication sources may be used. This has shrunk recently, and newer wireless technologies will continue to shrink the divide. However, access to data and information is critical and provides those that can access it power and opportunity over those that do not.

**Organizational Changes**

Because of changes in technology and economics, organizations have changed their structures and how they organize themselves. New technologies and economic realities have led organizations to become flatter, continuing to cut away at levels of management. It has also facilitated the use of outsourcing and finding suppliers who specialize in needed products.

Technology also facilitates the decentralization of organizations. Data and information flow more freely and can be shared and accessed with little regard to geography. Bar coding, instant messaging, web searches and other advances are now taken for granted, but have revolutionized the retrieval of information.

Organizational changes and a reduction in the friction of distance have also changed how organizations can locate facilities and employees. Especially in informational organizations, facilities can be located independent of products or end users. Hence the recent moves of telephone call centers to various parts of the English speaking world, or the contracting of science related projects to former East Block countries. Economically, data has become commoditized and has become cheaper.
These trends drive much of what happens in information organizations. Extension Services have often viewed themselves as information sharing organizations. A common phrase is that local agents obtain or link people to information. This still occurs, but the roles of the agent are changing.

Implications

Extension systems vary throughout the world. In the US, they are tied to major universities with the assumption that the university will produce information through research that will then be shared throughout a state via local offices. This system has been breaking down for some time for several reasons. Reductions in the number of farms and farmers, along with political support in some states, have led to a reduction in the number of local offices. It is easier and cheaper to obtain information from other sources. What is lost is the impact of having a trained change agent in the community. We discuss some key implications below.

Disintermediation

A move to choice society via the technological innovations described above leads to a process of disintermediation. Disintermediation refers to the continued reduction of “middle-men” in society. For example, with the advent of websites that offered cheap air flight tickets and information, the need for local travel agents plummeted. Fewer now exist, and those that do offer a value added niche service.

The same concept will plague Extension Services if they continue to focus on information delivery. There is no longer the same value in funding a local agent to provide information alone. They can be by-passed by clientele without ever leaving their homes.

Devolution

Devolution refers to the pushing down of government responsibilities to local levels without consummate funding. The U.S. maintains a complex system of local government and control, and funds local Extension offices with local dollars. As both the federal and state governments transfer the responsibility of funding and managing mandated programs to local communities, the amount of money that can be used for Extension (a non-mandated entity) becomes reduced. Hence Extension offices and staff are often forced to make cuts or reductions.

Recommendations

For the Extension system to continue to exist, it must provide a value to society. That value cannot come from distributing information alone. We believe that for Extension to survive, it must focus on value added functions along with delivery of information. This is especially critical if local offices and staffs are to be maintained. Here are our recommendations.
Local engagement

Working with and for local audiences and communities – local engagement – is a strong asset of most Extension Services. It will be critical for the current system to survive. Local engagement moves the system beyond routing information to listening and working with local clientele. Local needs drive a large part of the local programming. Clientele are directly involved in deciding local issues and solutions. This results in the direct application of knowledge and resources, and empowers community members to become better at solving their own issues and concerns. It also builds strong grassroots support for Extension programming.

Broaden the scholarship of Extension

Extension educators and professionals tend to undervalue the scholarship of what they are doing. In reality, the scholarship of Extension is critical. It provides insight into adult education, community organization, change and empowerment. We need to continue to conduct research on improving our methodologies.

Related to this, it is critical to conduct local applied or action research in communities. Local problems often need a systematic, intellectual problem solving method along with active local participation and ownership. Applied and action research can incorporate both into their processes. These activities lead to local engagement.

All of these scholarship activities must result in the discovery and sharing of information – a true part of the academic world. This will continue to validate Extension and contribute to the vitality of the profession.

Develop a portfolio of partnerships and resources

A central land grant university simply cannot be the only source of information for an Extension Service. This has seldom been the case, but it is even more true today. The generation of specialized knowledge and resources are too expensive to be maintained in any given institution (this includes centralized government agencies). A portfolio of relationships will need to be developed to generate collaborations to solve local problems.

Teams of educators and other partners can collaborate as needed on projects. New technologies allow the global application of information and resources. The U.S. system is currently staring a project to connect all 50+ state Extension systems through a website. Google, the popular search engine, performs a similar function already. A system to coordinate not just national, but global systems and people is badly needed. The sharing of information and resources would leverage all Extension Services and lead to the better use of resources.
Educator first

Extension professionals must first be educators, the original goal of the system. Being an educator means that educators must be proficient in adult teaching methods, and accept roles and responsibilities as a community change agent. In many smaller communities, the Extension Educator will often be the only person with skills in group processes and in organizing large functions.

A specialist with generalist understandings

Given the current drive towards more and more specialized knowledge and information, Extension Educators will need to specialize in some academic area. Extension educators need and should be expected to contribute both their profession and to a global body of knowledge.

Concurrently, they will need to have a base level of generalist skills to deal with local issues. Many of these issues will require other specialists, but the educator should be able to direct and assist in linking clientele with a person or information.

Conclusion

Because of changes in technology, organizational dynamics, and other issues Extension services can no longer simply serve as information providers. Extension educators have always added value to clientele by interpreting information and customizing it to local needs. Educators will have to do even more local engagement, as clientele can turn to numerous sources for information. The value added locally comes from a greater involvement and participation with clientele. Appropriate information can then be obtained from numerous resources.