

## We Are Not Your Grandfather's Extension Service

**Barbara G. Ludwig**, Professor and Chair  
Department of Extension  
The Ohio State University  
2120 Fyffe Road  
Columbus, Ohio USA 43210  
[ludwig.2@osu.edu](mailto:ludwig.2@osu.edu)

### Abstract

#### Coming of Age

*Extension is becoming a system wanting to engage with people and communities in education on critical issues. It is an organization reaching out to a broader community. Shifting priorities in agricultural production and rural development demand new approaches. The outlook has changed. Consider the 2001 European Seminar on Extension Education held in the Netherlands. Conference topics ranged from organic farming and sustaining small farmers to countries in transition and extension systems in need of change. The issues faced by participants varied from safe food and water supplies to contested land use and the loss of viability in rural communities. These and related issues pose challenges for researchers, educators and facilitators involved in agriculture and rural development across the globe. In Ohio, we are experiencing similar challenges. In the past, our emphasis was on planting from fence row to fence row; relying on fertilizers, herbicides and insecticides to maximize yields. This is changing, and a new paradigm is emerging. Agricultural production and economic viability is not enough, environmental and social concerns related to agriculture and rural development demand attention and matter as much to the agricultural community as to the general public. This paper advances that social, economic, environmental, and production issues must be linked in defining problems and formulating solutions for agriculture and shares an approach being initiated in one land grant university.*

### **The Way We Were**

The function of Universities has been described: to generate new knowledge through research and prepare the next generation of workers, managers and leaders through academic programs. Some universities in the U.S. and across the world also have an extension-type function where employees of the university transfer research based knowledge to citizens. Created through the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 the U.S. land grant system is composed of 106 institutions located in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia and several U.S. territories. Extension is physically situated in more than 3000 locations nationwide. The Kellogg Commission has funded and become an advocate in helping land-grant universities look at their role for the future in bringing the resources and expertise available on land grant campuses to bear on local problems in a coherent way.

George McDowell, a faculty member at Virginia Tech, in a recently released book titled *Land-Grant Universities and Extension into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Renegotiating or Abandoning a Social Contract (2001)* describes the golden age of agricultural research and extension in the 1950's and asserts most U.S. Extension systems are "stuck...drifting between a diminishing rural society and the urban transformation..." (p. x). McDowell, with both university and international development experience suggests that extension is being held hostage by agricultural interests to the point that it can no longer function effectively. His book offers alternative view points and will spark debates and discussion.

A draft of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Report (2001) by the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) emphasizes the need for land grant university leadership to develop new capacities and leverage resources to maintain a viable role given the challenges facing individuals and communities. It reminds us of the changes happening as the U.S. becomes a heterogeneous, urban society dominated by technological and communication advances and affected daily by global, economic and political alliances.

In other parts of the world, the connection between the university and advisory service providers is less formal and extension is viewed as a process. For many of the extension education centres/departments represented at the conference, the focus is on training at the undergraduate or graduate level or in providing pre service or in-service training for extension officers (Levander, 2000). Levander (2000) in her thoughtful study of how extension education is taught at European universities concludes with the statement that those intending to work as extension agents require theoretical understanding and methodological tools for managing the change process. Lawrence (2000) challenges extension personnel to look beyond traditional roles and provide leadership for maintaining sustainable rural communities. Sulaiman and van den Ban (2000) in looking at Indian extension education describe needed skills in agricultural and rural development and stress the importance of university education contributing to future extension workers' ability to work and live in a changing environment.

### **Engagement**

In an era of jet travel and technology linkages there is a growing mutuality among cultures. This can lull us into believing that we are pretty much the same. Christiansen (1998) suggests that "way down deep" we behave differently considering the cultural context in which we move. This makes it critical to pay attention in working with people and communities that the intended beneficiaries of the activities and projects are engaged in the development and implementation process. Unfortunately, we still see evidence of university and extension advisors practicing the "I know what is good for you" approach. Several years

ago, the World Bank became aware of numerous failures of projects in countries throughout the world. They came to the conclusion: if there was to be long-term sustainable development people, their goals, their cultures, their religions, their social relations must be central in development planning and implementation (Lawrence, 2000). Adoption of appropriate practices and innovations and on-going sustainability is a worthy goal.

Chances for success are enhanced by the “expert” having an ability to listen and give responsibility to the people who are to benefit. “We are not your grandfather’s extension service,” begins to tell the story of a system wanting to engage with people and communities in education on critical issues; moving beyond the conventional outreach function. Extension becomes a catalyst for making connections and a partner who is flexible and adaptable in approach. At Ohio State we have come to define engagement as the meaningful and mutually beneficial collaboration with partners in education, business public and social services.

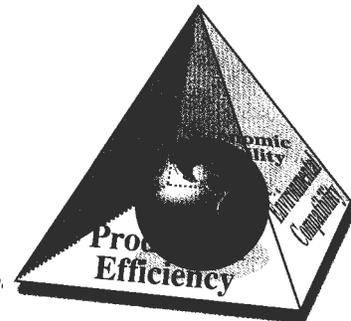
What is sought is the best answer for the current situation and identification of how together we can implement that answer or work together to research other alternatives. Nancy Bull (2001), Director of the University of Connecticut Extension Service notes that engagement in participatory education is not the same as having all the answers or even having the “right” answer. We must further the concept of critical learning communities by bringing our expertise in science and evaluation to farmer led research projects that enable answers to the difficult questions being asked.

Teaching, research and extension – these have been the foundation of the land grant university. Today, new words are being used to perhaps better describe that same foundation – *learning, discovery and engagement*. These descriptors are words introduced by the Kellogg Commission to describe the mission and role of universities as they move forward in matching the needs of the people and the resources of the university. Kellogg helped to establish many of the extension programs you will hear about at this conference. I challenge you to consider if these descriptors may help you in describing the functions of your positions in the future.

A New Ecological Paradigm: Integrated teaching, research and extension efforts focus on economic, environmental, social and production issues and form the core of an integrated systems approach symbolized by a pyramid.

**THE PYRAMID**

*One side represents production efficiency  
The second economic viability  
The third social responsibility and  
The fourth environmental compatibility.  
These sides form a structure with a program  
strength greater than if they stood alone.*



As we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century at Ohio State University, a new philosophy is emerging in the College of Food, Agricultural and Environmental Science (Moser, 2000). It influences how we approach issues ranging from land use to environmental stewardship and has led to the formation of multi-disciplinary teams comprised of university faculty, farm commodity, business, industry, environmental and governmental organizations to find acceptable solutions to tough issues. We are reaching beyond economics to shift the discussion to include complex realities of our lives and communities. Ohio State University

is a large school with 55,043 students, 4317 faculty and four branch campuses across the state in addition to the main campus in Columbus, Ohio. The College of Food, Agricultural and Environmental Sciences has eight academic units and a Department of Extension, 450 faculty and 3311 students enrolled in bachelor, master's and PhD programs. Strong research and extension programs exist and a two year agricultural technical school is a part of the college.

Our goal is to see the Ecological Paradigm imbedded into the curriculum used to educate students in our college, the design of our research and our advisory/extension functions. Based on the size of our operation this is not an easy task. A central challenge in agriculture today is facilitating sustainable development. There is no doubt this is a contested concept, but agreement seems to have been reached that sustainable development includes some balanced or integrated attention to economic, environment and social concerns. (Peters, 2001).

Today competition exists for how land should be used as cities and towns expand into rural areas. New neighbors relocating to rural areas are not aware of the normal business procedures of farming. The smells, noise, flies or equipment traffic associated with farming become public issues. Likewise, the entrance of a large scale farming operation into a rural community brings concerns. Livestock odors, waste disposal and clean water become issues discussed at town meetings and on the local news. Agriculture's obligation to produce a safe and abundant food supply for the world is now expected to take into account the impact on communities and the environment. Soil conservation, minimum tillage, crop varieties requiring fewer chemical inputs and use of computers in precision farming technology are helping farmers minimize the potential leakages of chemicals to the environment. Addressing and preventing the risk of disease associated with food and the promise of nutraceuticals are national and international challenges.

*If* we know that today's agriculture requires as much attention to the environment and needs of society as it does to production yields and the bottom line *then* using the Pyramid approach provides a guide. Here's an example: In Northwestern Ohio, rural communities are struggling with issues surrounding the establishment of large dairy operations. These conservative Swiss-German communities have found themselves debating through letters to the editor, public hearings and other forums proposed regulations, health issues and quality of life for non-farm neighbors of the operations. Complicating the issue is that the new dairies will be operated by farmers from outside the county, in fact from outside the United States. Citizen's groups have formed representing both sides and lawsuits are threatened. Technical experts from the land grant university have provided data and studies. Testimonials from opponents play on emotions and residents' fear of change. Some local farmers are questioning why extension agents and university researchers are not advocates for agricultural production, but are using the ecological paradigm approach. Opponents do not trust the university faculty as being unbiased and see them as supporting dairy expansion and the "Dutch Dairies." It is evident that technical and scientific experts alone cannot provide the solution to issues which have political, ethical and environmental impacts on communities and their inhabitants. We now are striving to refine and develop the skills needed to help people with widely divergent viewpoints engage in making decisions for their communities. Real situations are supporting the theoretical framework of Levander and Lawrence discussed earlier and benefiting from the Pyramid.

The lessons learned and beginning to be internalized by our college faculty are critical to future successes. *If* the future depends on recognizing the relationship between agriculture and ecological sustainability and environmental health, *then* as we embark on research, teaching and extension we begin to ask ourselves four questions: **Is it economically viable?** This cornerstone emphasizes that agriculture, food and natural resource industries must remain viable. **Is there production efficiency?** Agriculture must continue to produce a safe, abundant food supply. **Is it environmentally sound?** Agriculture must continue to lighten its footsteps on the environment. **Will society accept it?** We need only open the daily newspaper to realize that the agriculture of the future must have a good handle on its impact on communities (Moser, 2000).

### Concluding Thoughts – A Time of Change

A preeminent 20<sup>th</sup> century illustrator of life in America, Norman Rockwell, in 1948 captured in his illustration “The Work of the County Agent” the best of the technology-transfer image of Extension. McDowell (2001, p. 89-90) describes the illustration showing a shovel full of soil exposed from under the sod in a field not far from the barns and silo. While three generations of men from the farm family look on, the county agent tests the soil using the vials and solutions he has brought with him in his “science kit.” The application of science to farming is direct, personal and unambiguous. That the agent and his work are much respected and appreciated is clear in the faces of the farmers. Our work and reputation is based on “good science” and bringing unbiased information to decision makers and in the past was measured in terms of production agriculture.

The changes that are taking place in American agriculture demand extension programming with a style of educational delivery at times at odds with this ideal model from the 1950’s. I believe this conference will substantiate a similar trend in other parts of the world. Today’s complex mix of issues as seen in the Dutch dairy example point to the need for expertise, process skills and an ability to move beyond the traditional paradigm depicted in Rockwell’s illustration. Skills in building relationships in communities and across the region have not changed. The concerns of many non-farmers about impacts of a variety of farming practices and on-farm technology are changing the focus of extension programs to include public policy education. Sustainability challenges in agriculture are not merely technical, but also political and cultural (Peters, 2001)

Mr. James Patterson, a lifetime resident of rural Geauga County, Ohio is a farmer and successful orchard owner. His family continues the agricultural tradition. The farm now includes a golf course and farm market in response to changing business opportunities. Jim was elected to multiple terms as a county commissioner, served in leadership roles with his local farmer’s organization and was a leader of the Ohio Farm Bureau Board. More recently he was named to the Ohio State University Board of Trustees. Jim’s remarks (2001, p. 2-5) at a university conference form the basis for my concluding statements. I think they reflect the importance of listening to those we serve. He says:

We are a knowledge based society and universities are knowledge centers.

We discover knowledge.

We bring knowledge to life.

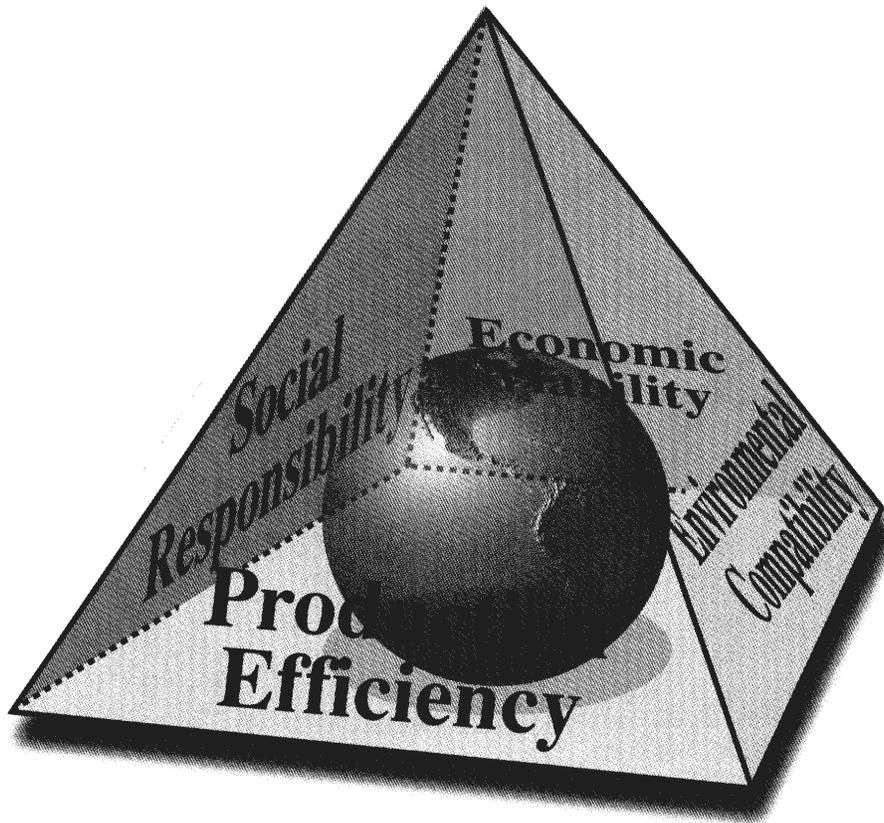
We deliver that knowledge –through teaching in the classroom and in using various means to everyone (in Ohio) and beyond.

We listen to emerging needs. That information is delivered back to researchers, and the cycle continues.

As Jim Patterson looks at what Extension offers and how the University is changing to become engaged, he sees us bring knowledge to life because we believe:

- In its most basic definition, it is the university's moral responsibility to society
- It is our means to transfer our knowledge to meeting the needs of the populace
- It is a form of debt repayment for society's support of our efforts in seeking and expanding the knowledge base.

Living up to Jim's vision and that of our clientele will be our challenge for the future.



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