Extension, Facing Current and Future Realities or Else

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Abstract
Public funding for extension work is facing critical analyses by policy makers and others as to its relevance and worthiness for continued funding. Program impacts are expected to play a strong role in supporting the case for continued funding when serious competition for public resources is at stake. This paper focuses on a case study of a potential budget cut and removal of public funding support for Cooperative Extension in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, during public budget hearings in 2004. Due to failure to have a strong record of accomplishments in that county, the county government ultimately eliminated some program components of the extension program. The value of communicating impacts and the worthiness of extension is underscored by a high-ranking Idaho State Legislator who explains in a testimonial herein how extension programs can produce major public benefits. The paper ultimately reflects on the propensity of extension workers to fail to recognize real program impacts, which leads to potential inability on extension’s part to defend its budgets until it is too late.
Introduction

A recent paper of the World Bank (Anderson and Feder, 2003) succinctly states, “…In wealthier countries, and for particular higher farmer income groups, extension systems will likely evolve into fee-for-service organizations.” While specifically mentioning systems focused on agriculture, such statements have implications in other program areas of extension as well, such as youth development, family and consumer sciences programs, and environmental and community development. Such implications appear to focus on the public’s willingness to pay for government services that may not be deemed as high priority public needs. Such decisions were made in 2004 by Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, which is a densely populated urban county. During the 2004-2005 budget approval process by the Mecklenburg County Commissioners, they eliminated funding support for program components of Extension that were judged to be of insufficient priority to receive any further funding from local government sources. This resulted in all Family and Consumer Sciences and Community Development programs of Cooperative Extension in the county subsequently being completely eliminated from further funding by the county.

In making the decision to eliminate public funding support for these programs, county officials made an analysis of all county-funded programs. This analysis required a priority ranking of such services, with the following questions asked:

- What are the consequences of eliminating this service?
- Should we (the county) be in this business?
- How do you plan to enhance the efficiency of this service?

These questions were submitted to each county agency and responses were limited to no more than two pages placed in bullet form and to be completed within one week. With this limited justification opportunity, each agency was forced to be judged according to the three parameters indicated. Such requirements for defending as a continuing public function have been witnessed in other countries (Anderson & Feder, 2003; and Collison, 2002) as well as in state and local policy decision-making arenas in the United States (Trail, 2004).

Purpose of paper

This paper presents insights into the modern day dynamics of public funding and shifts in funding for extension programs. The paper reviews two cases that may have implications for
other extension programs in other parts of the world. It also explores many of the underlying reasons for such shifts that have been experienced, and are indicated for the future as well. Within this context, focus is on identifying program impacts and their use for program support. The values of extension impacts is viewed in terms of cost effectiveness of extension programs, and the potential for using such information for justifying continued funding. Additionally, the possible ramifications are explored when such justifications cannot be adequately supported by identifiable impacts.

Methods/data sources
Considerable literature exists regarding the dynamics of extension program accountability and the positive as well as negative results or implications from accountability efforts or lack of efforts. The findings from the literature as well as a case study of local funding situations in North Carolina, USA, (NCCES, 2004) and testimonials regarding state funding for extension programs in Idaho, USA (T. Trail, personal communication, May 25, 2004), form the basic data for this paper.

Literature Review
While North Carolina Cooperative Extension has had a major accountability initiative and extensive program accomplishment reporting system for many years (Richardson and Mustian, 1996), in the United States as well as in other countries, local and state budget constraints continuously create an atmosphere whereby policy makers are faced with making resource allocations with a supply of public revenue that is inadequate to meet all public needs that exist within a population. Downsizing of many public functions has often been the ultimate result (Collison, 2002).

Numerous government agencies have been established over the years to focus on the most pressing public needs that are deemed worthy of receiving public funding. Cooperative Extension is one of those agencies that has been established for a long time, with the passage of the Smith-Lever Act by the U.S. Congress in 1914 (Rasmussen, 1989). In the earlier years of organized extension in the United States, sufficient support for extension programs was such that little effort needed to be devoted to assuring that agency funding was protected. The prevailing attitude was reflected in a statement by a State Extension Director in describing the key components of the extension program (Ballard, 1962, p. 625), who said:
“This includes establishing adequate budgets, recruiting competent staff, managing personnel, and maintaining a public information program. Most important of all is keeping a balance among these functions. A high level of competence in the staff is a first requirement. Once this is accomplished, financing becomes relatively easy, because people support a helpful program cooperatively decided and carried on by persons in whom they have confidence”.

Even years later, the former Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin Extension, Dr. Patrick Boyle (1999), stated “some extension personnel like to hide.” Even with the knowledge of accountability needs and requirements, oftentimes extension workers feel that their efforts speak for themselves.

Case Study

Unfortunately, this organizational culture, as shared in the literature review, seemed to be prevalent in the threatened Mecklenburg County for many years, as demonstrated by their failures to report substantive program accomplishments into the established state reporting system (NCCES, ERS, 2004). Indeed, in a location with a large population (over 700,000 population in 2003), the total known contacts reached were only to 4.37% of the population. This coverage had steadily declined from 15.23% in 1999 (NCCES, ERS, 2004). These known contacts reflect all of the client contacts reported by Extension in that county, and percentages have been adjusted to reflect potential duplications to determine the closest estimate of the total population served by the Extension program (Richardson, 2004). This dearth of program accomplishments and population coverage that converged with a multimillion-dollar budget shortfall for that county resulted in elected officials making the critical analysis of each and every county program. The failure of Extension to reach even a steady number of clients, apparent inadequate program implementation and impacts, and the prevailing competition for scarce resources resulted in significant segments of the total program being eliminated. Urban horticulture, pesticide training, and 4-H youth programs were the only Extension programs that policy makers showed a willingness to fund, with Community Development and Family and Consumer Science programs completely eliminated.

While this county was the one hit hardest by budget cuts and personnel reductions in 2004, some other North Carolina county policy makers asked relevance questions as well. Considerable emphasis appeared to be placed on program relevance, coverage, impacts, efficiency, and
duplication with other service providers and agencies. Even program leveraging through the greater utilization of volunteers as compared to paid staff teaching contacts was analyzed. A limited number of these counties saw their local Extension budgets reduced a relatively small amount, with only one or two counties losing one or two support staff and some operating funds. However, even in this atmosphere, some other counties with highly active programs that are visibly producing major impacts among their clients gained significant budget increases.

**Impacts**

Programs that provide substantive economic, social, or environmental benefits to their clients and to the public at large have been clearly identified as key parameters for determining the impacts of extension programs. Bennett (1975) established a program progression model for program inputs, outputs, and impacts that has stood the test of time as a guide for measuring the progressive level of extension programs. Over the years, the demands for programs that produce impacts have been well documented in the literature as well as being placed into laws requiring articulation of program impacts to the public domain (US Government, 1993, 1998). The guidelines for program planning and reporting from the federal AREERA Act states that… “Institutions should describe the contributions of extension staff and programs toward impacts rather than describe the programs (United States Government, 1998).” Indeed, on a global basis, Alex, Zijp, and Byerlee (2002) emphasized that extension programs should be held accountable for use of funds and for results; be relevant to the needs of clients; and be monitored and evaluated for assuring relevance and cost effectiveness.

The direct benefits of program impacts is demonstrated by a testimonial by an influential state legislator in the Idaho House of Representatives following a presentation at an international extension conference of program-valuing information for an extension youth program (Richardson, 2004). The program success story presented in that paper, and subsequent testimonial by Dr. Thomas Trail (2004), Professor Emeritus, Washington State University and currently Vice-Chair, Agriculture Committee, Idaho State House of Representatives are stated as follows:
Cost Savings Success Story

Location: Hoke, North Carolina
Reported by: Clinton McRae

According to the Department of Juvenile Justice, Hoke County is a "target county" because a large number of youth are sent to training school. Between January and May 2002, it has cost the county $25,272 to detain youth. To address the character and decision-making skills of youth, Cooperative Extension offers a prevention program called 4H Life Skills. Cooperative Extension collaborates with Hoke County Schools to offer the program to elementary and middle school students. The program has reached 158 students this year and none of the students who have graduated from the program have been referred to juvenile justice. For each child not referred to juvenile justice, the county saves $72.00 a day and $26,280 a year (Richardson, Moore, and Young, 2004).

Testimonial by Dr. Thomas Trail (personal communication, May 25, 2004. See note at end of reference list)

"I would like to verify how important that communicating program values really is. Last year, Cooperative Extension in Idaho was facing a budget cut of at least 2%. In my position as a State Representative in the Idaho Legislature, in which I serve as Vice Chairman of the Agricultural Committee, we requested any information that Extension may have available to verify and support the public expenditures from the state of Idaho for Extension programs. We were able to obtain information, very much like the success story presented in this paper, which specified very specific and concise benefits to society and in taxpayer savings as a result of 4-H programs in 2002, the University of Idaho conducted a 4-H Impact Study. The study was conducted from 53 randomly selected schools and 5th, 7th, and 9th graders were asked a number of questions. Of the 3,601 students surveyed, 577 reported they were involved in 4-H activities.

The study showed that 4-H members were more likely to succeed in school, be more involved in their community, and are looked up to by other kids. One 4-H’er said, "Because of the 4-H program, I have a sense of purpose in my life." This study shows that if you are involved, you won't be a nuisance. You will be an important member of society. The vast majority of 4-Hers indicated that 4-H gave them a sense of purpose in life.

About 11% of Idaho’s youth are not involved in any out of school activities or other programs while the majority of all Idaho 4-H Club members (68%) are involved in up to four out of school activities. Because of all the activities that 4-H members do, they are less likely to do drugs and engage in juvenile crime activities. Statistics showed that only 7% of 4-H members have used illegal drugs while 30% of non-4-H members have used illegal drugs.
Research shows that Idaho 4-H youth feel more socially competent and self-assured than other youth. They are more able to make friends, they feel comfortable in new situations, and they volunteer to lead activities in school classes. The percentage of youth that have held a leadership position was 21% of 4-Hers and only 13% of non-4-Hers. Also 4-Hers have held more school leadership positions and more have served as committee members than regular youth.

Last but not least 4-H youth are more connected with their community, family, and with themselves. They have better relationships with their parents and other adults. Their opinions matter because they are positive members in their community.

In this Idaho case, it was very clear that the lower rate of juvenile offenses and drug-related problems was a savings to society. We did get an added $200,000 budget addition for the extension and 4-H programs partially as a result of the information shared with the House and Senate Ag Committee as well as the Joint Appropriation and Finance Committee. This budget increase was approved, even though it was in a very tight budget year.

In a parallel study that I was involved in several years ago in Washington State, we developed an intensive two-week outdoor camping and rope challenge program for inner city at risk youth. The impact of that study was very significant. The 4-Hers who graduated from the program (as contrasted to the rest of their school population) significantly improved their academic performance, had a much lower rate of absenteeism, evidence a very low rate of participating in juvenile crime activities or taking drugs, increased their participation in leadership activities and offices in the school, and their rate of volunteerism in school in community activities was higher than the control group.

A savings of about $300,000 a year was realized with the program. This was utilizing the lower rate of juvenile offenses for the kids involved in the two week “At Risk Leadership” Camp as compared to the school population in general. The data looked at the per day cost of incarceration for a teen offender.”
Results and Conclusions

The data show that, in many situations, extension programs are producing very favorable cost benefit ratios. However, in many circumstances, where programs have not been successful or inadequately reported, funding has been lost or significantly reduced (Anderson and Feder, 2003). Without such impact data and marketing of program impacts to clients, policy makers, and other key decision makers, it is no longer viable to expect that continued willingness by the public to support extension programs can be expected. Indeed, Hanson, Just, and Lainez (2004) suggest that in evaluating the efficiency and application of extension programs, questions need to be asked regarding the role of private versus public goods in determining how programs should be financed; whether the most cost-effective delivery is private, public, or some combination of these. Moreover, in the quest for efficiency of extension work, many strategies have been offered to increase the efficiencies and cost effectiveness of extension work (Alex, Zijp, and Byerlee, 2002; Anderson and Feder; 2003; Feder, Willett, and Zijp, 1999; Marsh and Pannell, 2000; Rivera, Qamar, and Crowder 2001). Generally, these strategies involve all private funding, all public funding, or some combinations of the two.

Educational Importance, Implications and Application

It is imperative that extension professionals and practitioners know and understand the dynamics of changing extension systems and support modes in all parts of the world. Further, by understanding and gaining appreciation for the fact that the assumption that funding will always be there is no longer reality. This assessment applies regardless of the system location. With such reality thinking, staff, clients and supporters of extension can take proactive measures to ensure continuing support is provided or at least assure that knowledge of program impacts is well known by persons making funding decisions. Competition for public as well as private funds has been and is expected to become even more intense as changing environmental, economic and societal needs require allocation of funding based on the highest priorities identified for such funds. By understanding the stages of impacts development in extension programs and recognizing the need for marketing such information for accountability purposes, as reflected in the Hoke County, North Carolina, and Idaho cases, extension practitioners and administrators can better formulate proactive initiatives to identify, collect, and assure that such positive impact information is provided to decision makers and others who stand to influence support for extension programs.
Unfortunately, based on continuing content analysis of accomplishment statements and purported success stories (NCCES, 2004), as well as anecdotal input from other extension system personnel in other states and countries, it appears that many, if not most, extension workers deem program success to be in the lower stages of the program progressions such as inputs, activities, attendance, and client satisfaction, as indicated by Bennett (1975), and further articulated by Diem (2003) rather than focusing on the outcomes of what clients really did with the information provided or the activities in which they participated. Of most importance, the real end results accomplished by those changes in behavior by the clients that have a positive influence on society, the environment, or the economic standing of the clients or communities need to be documented and shared with the clients themselves, policy makers, legislators, governmental authorities, and extension program administrators.

The analysis of the literature, case studies, and testimonials, along with the implications regarding practice versus need in the identification of impacts; their critical components and use for organizational support, indicate that much needs to be achieved in extension accountability. However, by being armed with knowledge of organizational benefits for identifying and conveying program impact information, it is hoped that extension workers gain an improved perspective of why the identification and communication of real program outcomes that reflect worthy cost-effective impacts is critical to the survival of public extension systems or even funding for those supported via alternative means.

Continuous personnel training by extension systems to help workers understand what constitutes program impacts must be an on-going function. Also, these functions must also be augmented by serious initiatives to market program impact information to appropriate audiences who hold the keys to influencing decision makers.

Societies are changing throughout the world, and the resulting dynamics require difficult decisions as to what will be supported, whether in personal decisions or in public decisions as well. Extension must understand that accountability functions and visibility will not go away, but can be expected to intensify in the foreseeable future. Possession of the necessary knowledge tools and willingness to implement an impacts-based accountability program will assure that when funding decisions are made that extension will be at the forefront in articulating the value and cost effectiveness of its programs. Or else, its programs will be simply eliminated.
Feder, Willett and Zijp (2001) took the position that a likely reason for lack of adequate support of extension by politicians and policy makers is their inability to derive political capital that can be gained from public outlay that has visible impact. Such political benefits cannot be gained from expenditures that have unclear cause-effect results, which has sometimes been said of extension. Little argument can be made against those who make such statements, as the information presented in this paper bears witness to documented successes and failures of adequately or inadequately demonstrated performance of extension programs. The realities of this phenomenon appear to be applicable worldwide. Are we ready and are we willing to face those realities?

References:


**Note:**

The statement, “Testimonial on importance of communicating program values,” was made by Dr. Thomas Trail, Vice Chair of the Agriculture Committee of the Idaho State House of Representatives, in discussions immediately following a presentation by Drs. John Richardson and Chuck Moore entitled: *Taking the Ultimate Step by Placing Economic Values on Extension Program Impacts,* at the Association for International Agricultural and Extension Education conference in Dublin, Ireland, May 25, 2004. This written information was provided to Dr. Richardson by Dr. Trail in a recounting of his comments, which are essentially identical to his spoken words.

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