

Kentucky's Urban Extension Focus

Abstract

Defining the success of Urban Extension units is sometimes challenging. For those Extension agents, specialists, administrators, and others who have worked to bring solid, research-based programming to urban communities, it is no surprise that working in these communities brings its own unique and sometimes difficult challenges. Kentucky's Urban Extension Forum was designed to help identify both the structural barriers to urban Extension success as well as possible solutions.

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Introduction

Ask most state Extension Directors to name their top challenges, and the topic of "urban" Extension will surely arise. Defining success for urban Extension units is often challenging. Extension professionals who have struggled to deliver solid, research-based programming to urban communities know that each has its own difficult challenges.

Often, Extension educators seek to duplicate the same successful programming curricula and delivery methods that have served well in rural communities, with less than optimal results (Brown, 1965a). In 1965, Brown and Yep specifically mentioned the following organizational components that Extension must address to remain relevant in urban communities (Brown, 1965b; Yep, 1980). These same components remain elusive today.

1. Establishing objectives and goals
2. Identifying program content
3. Commitment of personnel
4. Inability to secure local matching funds from metro governments
5. Supporting public and clientele concerns

6. Delivery methods and techniques
7. Extension's need for effective public information program to increase its organizational visibility
8. Lack of access to a comparable research and expertise base for their educational program
9. Competing groups and power structures
10. Population scale and diversity

A survey of state Extension administrators regarding urban Extension was conducted in 1973. According to Paulson (1973), 98% of the administrators who responded validated the notion that the traditional "Extension Model" remained effective in addressing urban public issues. However, notable limitations were identified by Paulson (1973) including:

1. Personnel not oriented toward urban problems
2. Unwillingness to adapt organizationally to meet urban needs
3. Delivery system needs major adjustment to reach urban audiences
4. Research base for building urban models is very fragmented
5. Heterogeneity of population
6. The public image of Extension is mainly agricultural
7. Sheer volume of the urban audience

Not everyone is convinced that traditional Extension is appropriate for urban communities. Two questions continue to arise: 1) how can the resources of land-grant universities be utilized to address broader social issues? and 2) why can't Extension's rural success be transfused into urban America? (Miller, 1973).

Miller proposed that counties be restructured and reclassified as "metro, urban or rural." The most significant difference being the addition of a county administrator ("professional communicator and manager of people and projects") in urban and metro models and agents who "are receptive to change, and who communicate well both within and outside the organization" (Miller, 1973).

In April 1991, Texas Extension implemented an "Urban Initiative" for its largest counties. This initiative focused on "development of urban faculty, involving urban lay leaders in program development and education programs for urban audiences" (Fehlis, 1992). This would be similar to the metro model described by Miller.

The concept of "disruptive innovation" has been promoted as a means of "exploring, implementing, or evaluating organizational innovations...to enhance relevance and sustainability" (Franz & Cox,

2012). The authors point out how decreases in traditional funding, office closures, and the need for alternative methods to communicate program impact have led to "disruptive" but innovative solutions.

But questions remain. Are Extension's efforts to adapt to an increasing urban landscape having the desired impact? A 1988 survey by Clemson University Extension of the South Carolina legislature found that only 11% understood Extension to have an educational focus (Miller, 1988).

A 1995 national survey of public perception of Extension showed that while "awareness of Extension has remained high...annual use of Extension registered a decline" (Warner, Christenson, Dillman, & Salant, 1996). The study also showed lower usage among those in the Northeast and West, those in urban communities, those of younger ages, and those who had lower education and income levels.

A 2010 Ohio State survey found that 20% of respondents were familiar with Extension programs and services. As in the 1996 nationwide survey, awareness was lower among younger respondents, those with lower incomes, and those in more urban areas (Loibl, Diekmann, & Batte, 2010).

A statewide awareness survey commissioned by the University of Kentucky, College of Agriculture in 2013 yielded more positive results. This survey showed that 66.8% of respondents were aware of the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service and that of those who were aware, 72.1% had contact or had used Extension office services (University of Kentucky, 2013).

Purpose

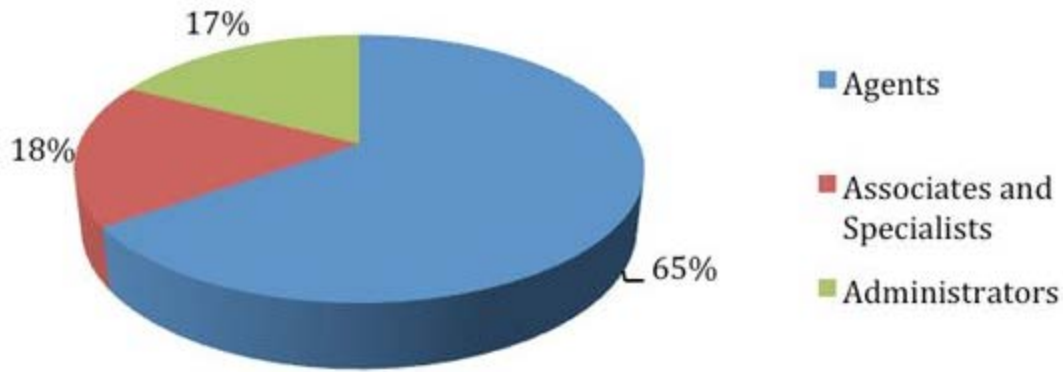
Kentucky is a relatively small state with a population of 4.3 million residents (Census, 2010). However, the last decade has seen significant changes in population. As a result of these population changes, the proportion of state legislators who serve "urban" counties has dramatically increased. Because urban legislators are generally less aware of Extension work, this could erode sources of traditional legislative strength (Miller, 1988).

To address this and other issues, Kentucky Cooperative Extension hosted an Urban Extension Forum in January 2013. The purpose of the forum was to explore the "structural" barriers and solutions that would allow Extension to more successfully function in urban communities.

The Urban Forum was attended by a diverse group of 69 Extension personnel from the University of Kentucky and Kentucky State University, as shown in Figure 1. Attendees rotated between five moderated discussion groups:

1. Adequate Financial Resources in Urban Communities
2. Local Priorities in Urban Communities
3. High Levels of Teamwork In Urban Communities
4. Strong Communication/Interaction with Urban Government Leaders
5. Visionary/Creative Leadership in Urban Communities

Figure 1.
Urban Forum Attendance



Analysis

Summaries of each group's work were shared at the conclusion of the forum, highlighting recurring discussion themes. All feedback was recorded and, along with the post forum evaluation, were used by our follow-up team. A review of the feedback received yielded the following categories, which are listed by frequency (number of times topic mentioned).

1. Media Relations/Marketing (28)
2. Relationships with Elected Officials (19)
3. Specialist Development of Urban Curriculum (18)
4. Advisory Councils (17)
5. Structural Issues (16)
6. Partnerships (10)
7. Cultural Awareness (9)
8. Resources (9)
9. Work Life Issues (6)
10. Work Location (5)
11. Change (5)
12. Job Descriptions (2)

Implications for Kentucky and Other States

Strengthening urban Extension units is a continual process. Following the Urban Extension Forum, invitations were extended to key agents, associates, specialists, administrators, and State Extension Council members to serve on an Urban Action Team. The mission of the follow-up team was to examine the feedback from Forum participants and develop recommendations for "structural" solutions that could positively impact urban Extension units.

The Urban Action Team met in May 2013 and organized around the issues illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2.
Urban Action Team Focus Issues



The team met again in September 2013 with recommendation they felt would strengthen the Kentucky Extension system, but could also be applied in other states. The recommendations were as follows.

1. County Coordinators are needed in Kentucky's largest counties (currently not a common practice).
2. All other counties need a designated agent "primarily" responsible for educating, communicating, and building relationships with local, state, and federal elected officials.
3. More structure to agent training. Making sure key skill sets are addressed early in the Extension agent's professional career.
4. Agent responsibilities to supervise support staff and collaborate with elected officials should be clearly communicated in position descriptions.
5. Need to know what's working and what's not in regard to councils. Committee would like to initiate a focus group of State Extension Council members and agents.

6. A unified, consistent marketing message, theme, and collateral with tag lines and an updated on-line "look" for all counties.
7. Seems there is a definite need for some type of training for campus faculty/staff in regard to working with urban Extension agents in understanding local needs of urban communities.
8. There should be more structured opportunities for specialists and agents to collaborate on trainings, materials, programming, etc., together in a way that both sides can express need, issues, etc.

While only a start, these efforts symbolize the great importance Kentucky Extension places on delivering outstanding service to all citizens of the Commonwealth. Future topics of discussion will include expanding Extension's urban reach and efficient use of scarce resources to support Extension staff likely to become early adopters of innovative change (Diem, Hino, Martin, & Meisenbach, 2011).

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