

Summer 1992 // Volume 30 // Number 2 // Feature Articles // 2FEA3



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Urban Extension Programs

Abstract

...in April 1991, Texas Extension implemented an "Urban Initiative" for its major metropolitan counties. The initiative focuses on development of the urban faculty, involvement of urban lay leaders in program development, and educational programs for urban audiences. The initiative involves administrative and programmatic change based on the results of the study, but adapted to the uniqueness of each county situation.

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Extension has a history of helping people in rural America use scientific, research-based information to solve practical problems and use available resources. However, the complexity of economic, social, and environmental issues Extension must now address doesn't stop at the rural county line. As a consequence, more state Extension Services are examining the efficient and effective use of Extension resources in metropolitan counties.

In Texas, Census estimates made clear the need to examine educational programming in urban counties. About 50% of the 16.8 million Texas residents live in just six of the 254 counties: Harris, Dallas, Tarrant, Bexar, El Paso, and Travis. Conducting educational programs in these six densely populated counties offers challenges not present in the more traditional educational programs of the other 248 counties. For example, while water quality, conservation, and waste management were identified as critical issues in both urban and rural counties, the specific problems differ greatly. Water quality and conservation programs in rural Texas focus on agriculture, while in urban areas the focus is on industrial and homeowner usage. Waste management programs in rural areas focus on manure disposal at feedlots and dairies; urban programs focus on lawn clippings, leaves, and home recycling. Each is important, but requires different resources, technical support, and approaches to program delivery.

In 1989, the Texas Agricultural Extension Service (TAEX) administration appointed a task force composed of agents, administrators, and specialists to study Extension programming in urban/metropolitan areas. The task force was charged with responding to four questions:

- What additional challenges does a county Extension agent in a metropolitan county face as opposed to agents in rural counties?
- What differences in staffing patterns and expertise are needed in metropolitan counties versus rural counties?

- What should be the primary educational program delivery methods used in metropolitan counties to make more effective and efficient use of agent time and how does that differ from rural areas?
- What type of additional specialist support or other resources will be necessary to support the metropolitan faculty and their programs? The answers to these questions would provide the basis for adjustments to overall programming efforts in Texas.

Urban Program Study

To begin addressing these questions, the urban task force undertook a two-year study of current Extension organizational structures and programming methods in urban areas across the nation. Ideas on future needs, challenges, and concerns for urban Extension programs also were solicited. Data were collected through a telephone survey of county or district directors in 13 urban locations. These locations included the counties and urban areas around Arlington, Virginia; Atlanta, Georgia; Baltimore, Maryland; Kansas City, Missouri; Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota; Nassau County, New York; Jacksonville, Tampa, and St. Petersburg, Florida; Portland, Oregon; Phoenix, Arizona; and Seattle, Washington. In addition, members of the urban task force conducted on-site visits and conferences with Extension faculty in the five-county Atlanta, Georgia metro area; Hillsborough County (Tampa), Florida; and Maricopa County (Phoenix), Arizona.

Results

Combined results of the telephone survey, on-site visits, and a literature search of urban programming revealed a wide variety of approaches being used in working with urban audiences. Results from the telephone survey indicated common problems and frustrations among urban faculties. Urban county faculty expressed concern about: their effectiveness in programming, demands on their time from the telephone and clientele requests that leave them little time for program planning and implementation, and lack of clear direction and expectations from administrators. Urban faculty are hungry for directions and ideas on how to better program for large audiences. Respondents emphasized the need for better communications and nationwide networking among urban county faculty and for urban Extension conferences to discuss successful programming efforts.

Responses by the study participants were condensed into eight challenges and concerns:

1. State Extension administrators must establish an environment for understanding and appreciation of both rural and urban educational programming efforts. Educational programs offered in urban areas can't be construed as being in competition with programs offered in rural areas, but rather should be complementary, covering the total spectrum of the issues. Statewide issues and organizational objectives apply to both rural and urban counties. But, administrators must appreciate that programming and meeting organizational objectives varies greatly between urban and rural counties because of potentially huge audiences, the characteristics of the urban residents, and the need for nontraditional specialists and other resource support.
2. Urban faculty must establish a balance between proactive and reactive programming. With millions of people as potential clients, urban faculty can easily be caught in a totally reactive educational role, leaving little time to develop productive, creative, and innovative programs. Setting program priorities, targeting audiences, effectively using media resources, and incorporating volunteers and paraprofessionals into the programs were potential solutions offered by survey participants.
3. Accountability must be a high priority of Extension programs in urban areas. Effective urban Extension educational programs can have far-reaching benefits for the statewide organization. Visibility of Extension programs in the urban media is literally broadcast throughout the state and helps raise awareness of Extension generally. Networking, reaching large numbers of clientele through direct contact, and targeting specific audiences for change can result in significant impacts of interest to local, state, and national leaders. Because of this visibility and the fact that a large percentage of our potential clientele, decision makers, and elected officials live in urban areas, good Extension programs in urban counties are vital.
4. The diversity of many urban counties must be addressed. The presence of central cities, suburbs, and, in many cases, rural areas within a single county adds to the complexities of programming and staffing. Addressing critical issues becomes difficult because the problems associated with issues can vary tremendously from the central cities to the rural areas. Program delivery methods and techniques must vary widely because of the nature of the audiences and the difficulty of maintaining the type and expertise of faculty needed to carry out the full range of educational programming in diverse county situations.

5. Additional training on working with urban audiences and on educational delivery methods for large audiences is needed. Extension agents are often promoted through the system as a result of their excellent performance in rural counties. As these agents accept urban assignments, they require training to be effective educators in the urban environment. The training should focus on programming for urban audiences, responding to clientele, mass media, public relations skills, time management, stress management, conflict resolution, and other management skills. Extension should also consider what degrees, background, and experiences are necessary to adequately prepare an individual to serve as an urban Extension educator.
6. ES-USDA should provide the leadership to establish an urban Extension faculty network across the United States. Agents have created some exceptionally effective programs for urban audiences, but the lack of a network for exchanging ideas has delayed program transfer across urban counties. Urban faculty could better use their time to adapt and build on proven programs rather than recreating them. A mechanism for communication among urban faculties is critical to timely, effective Extension programs.
7. Teamwork and a total county faculty commitment to issues- based programming are necessary for urban program success. Individual programming efforts continue to be a necessary component of the Extension educational program. However, individual efforts must be weighed against the results of teams addressing specific issues. Extension programs should focus on critical issues people have indicated are the most important to them. By combining the talents and skills of county faculty into issue teams, a staff can multiply its efforts to thoroughly address an issue. The larger the number of professional faculty on a county staff, the greater the challenge and the benefit of teamwork.
8. Volunteer development and management are critical to programming in urban counties. Organizational effort should be devoted to recruiting, training, and using paraprofessionals and volunteers to extend the effectiveness of the professional staff. This implies additional training for professionals on managing people-particularly volunteers. It also requires total staff involvement and the use of paraprofessionals and volunteers in all program areas.

Conclusions

The urban study provided answers to many of the questions posed by the TAEX administration about urban programs. As a result, in April 1991, Texas Extension implemented an "Urban Initiative" for its major metropolitan counties. The initiative focuses on development of the urban faculty, involvement of urban lay leaders in program development, and educational programs for urban audiences. The initiative involves administrative and programmatic change based on the results of the study, but adapted to the uniqueness of each county situation. As Texas urban areas continue to grow, this initiative is an effort to position Extension to serve the educational needs of all the people. This concern is heightened as we realize future support for Extension in Texas depends heavily on our having visible, effective Extension educational programs in urban areas.

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