Professional Opportunities in Cooperative Extension

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As "the largest problem-solving educational system in the world" (Vines & Anderson, 1976), the mission of the Cooperative Extension Service is to improve the quality of life for individuals, families, and communities through the application of research to daily economic, social, and environmental problems. The manner in which this mission is fulfilled makes Cooperative Extension a unique educational force, as indicated in the following characteristics (see Sanders, 1966a; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1986).

1. The Cooperative Extension Service is a cooperative effort between county, state, and federal governments. It is based on university campuses, but the majority of its work is conducted through community extension offices located throughout the United States and its territories.

2. Cooperative Extension is an educational service, but it has no fixed curriculum. It confers no degrees and gives no diplomas.

3. Cooperative Extension is concerned with helping people to identify and solve practical problems through the use of informational materials, educational programs, and technology.

4. Cooperative Extension views individuals and families as active learners and problem solvers who are capable of making their own decisions when supplied with factual information and meaningful options. Extension professionals thus withhold personal judgements while supplying the information necessary for families to make their own informed decisions.

5. Extension professionals use the state as their classroom working with a large and diverse audience. Extension professionals recognize and are sensitive to the differing values of communities across their state.

6. Extension professionals employ a wide range of delivery methods, including demonstrations, workshops, videotapes, personal contacts, telephone calls, correspondence courses, contests, exhibits, pamphlets, computer programs, newsletters, telecommunications, and the mass media.

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Cooperative Extension professionals network with community and state leaders in identifying and resolving economic, social, and environmental problems.

Even though Cooperative Extension can serve as a source of employment for undergraduate and graduate students majoring in family studies, many students are unfamiliar with the organization's structural and operational characteristics. In this paper, the authors provide students with a broad overview of the nature of Cooperative Extension work from both a historical and contemporary perspective. The work roles carried out by extension professionals also are summarized, as well as associated rewards and stressors.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Students enrolled in a family studies programs at a land grant university often hear that their institution has a threefold mission: (a) teaching; (b) research; and (c) dissemination of information to citizens as a means of public service to the state. It is unfortunate that the historical significance of these land grant missions, or their link to Cooperative Extension, is seldom explained to students, since an understanding of the philosophical ties between the two institutions is a necessary prerequisite to appreciating the work carried out by Cooperative Extension within contemporary American society. The nature of the link between the land grant university system and Cooperative Extension is defined in three legislative acts dating back to the nineteenth century (see Sanders, 1966a; 1966b; 1966c; Vitzthum & Florell, 1976).

The Morrill Acts

Congress passed the Morrill Act of 1862, sometimes called the Land Grant College Act, as a means of providing federal support in the form of grants of public land to states for the purpose of teaching agriculture and the mechanical arts. A second Morrill Act of 1890 stipulated that land grant universities be opened to both white and black students or that separate, but equal, facilities be established (Jones, 1976).

The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 are important in the history of American education because they made possible the study of the classics as well as the study of domestic economy, farming industry and commerce (Caldwell, 1976). Land grant universities, the "people's colleges" (Caul & Miller, 1976), symbolized America's commitment to the "liberal" education and upward mobility of "common man" (Caldwell, 1976). As a result of their democratic and comprehensive approach to education, land grant universities have over the years developed into major centers of higher education and are responsible for generating, testing, and transmitting knowledge across a range of scientific and humanistic fields.

The Hatch Act

In the beginning, land grant universities had little "scientific agriculture" to teach (Caul & Miller, 1976). Congress thus passed the Hatch Act of 1887 authorizing the establishment of experiment stations whose purpose was to conduct agricultural research. The majority of experiment station research today continues to deal with agricultural issues. Of course, most university faculty in family studies also have research responsibilities. And, as already mentioned, research from universities and land grant experiment stations is the cornerstone upon which the educational programs of Cooperative Extension are based.
The Smith-Lever Act

Early in this century a pragmatic congress saw the need to apply the research conducted at experiment stations and universities to the needs of the general public. This led to the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 which established the Cooperative Extension Service and provided for the dissemination of agriculture and home economics research to individuals and families. Cooperative Extension thus became the third partner in the land grant university triad of teaching, research, and public service. Today, four program areas make-up the major divisions within Cooperative Extension, although states label and administratively structure the divisions in different ways. Generally stated, the four divisions are as follows.

1. **Agriculture and natural resources** addresses the educational and technological needs of producers and consumers of agriculture, as well as appropriate government agencies.

2. **Home economics** addresses the social and material needs of individuals and families within and outside the home setting.

3. **4-H and youth work** prepares young people for life as productive and responsible citizens through learning activities, project work, and citizenship programs.

4. **Community resource development** helps people work together to resolve local problems and to make their community a better place in which to work, live, and raise a family.

CURRENT CHALLENGES IN COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Given the close ties that have existed between the growth of land grant universities and Cooperative Extension, it is interesting that some view the latter as an outdated, strictly rurally-based service having little relevance to the problems of contemporary life (Warner & Christenson, 1983). While it is true that many of the early Cooperative Extension program thrusts were aimed at the more than 30% of Americans working on farms or living in rural areas (University of Wisconsin, 1983), today over a quarter of rural and urban households alike make use of Cooperative Extension services (Warner & Christenson, 1983). The relevance of Cooperative Extension to contemporary life is in large part due to its flexibility and ability to adapt to changes in society.

Between World War II and 1987, four long-range evaluation studies addressed the role of Cooperative Extension within American society (for review see Ratchford, 1984). A fifth evaluation study was recently completed that addressed the challenges to Cooperative Extension in the next century (see Futures Task Force, Policy, 1987). Some of the more notable challenges contained in the resulting report were that Cooperative Extension should:

1. improve its program planning process by anticipating future issues, rather than simply responding to events.

2. emphasize interdisciplinary program planning, as opposed to disciplinary-based planning, that reflects the complex forces at work in contemporary society.
3. be selective in identifying the most critical program issues for which it has the expertise and resources to realistically address.

4. expand its knowledge base by including expertise from colleges traditionally not represented in the organization (e.g., medicine, business, sciences).

5. reassess the ability of community-based extension agents to remain technically competent in a broad range of subject matters.

6. reassess the geographic boundaries assigned to extension agents (county versus multicounty agents) and subject matter specialists (state versus multistate specialists).

7. serve as a resource base for applied research utilization with a wide range of new agricultural, family, youth, and community audiences.

8. make use of new technology in the delivery of educational programs.

9. stress problem solution in educational programs rather than the more traditional but static concept of knowledge transfer.

10. make better use of program evaluations to document the value and accountability of Cooperative Extension.

11. do a better job of testing research in the field.

At the heart of these challenges is the idea that while Cooperative Extension will continue to carry the same educational mission as in the past, it will need to do so in a manner that is reflective of changing clientele needs, organizational resources, and social realities. For example, one of the most noted results of the 1987 evaluation report was the identification of nine interdisciplinary priority initiatives. It is these nine initiatives that will guide the work undertaken by Cooperative Extension in the 1990's and the twenty-first century. Details about the initiatives, summarized below, can be obtained from Cooperative Extension Services at land grant universities.

1. Alternative agricultural opportunities is to focus on helping agricultural producers evaluate alternative but profitable agricultural enterprises that will also protect the environment.

2. Building human capital is to focus on helping children and adults develop their full potential at home and in society through acquiring better career, decisionmaking, and leadership skills.

3. Competitiveness and profitability of American agriculture is to focus on helping farmers improve their economic efficiency based on new research and technology, environmental concerns, and global market changes.

4. Conservation and management of natural resources is to focus on promoting environmentally sound management practices that will ensure the profitability and preservation of natural resources like soil, water, rangeland, forests, and wildlife.

5. Family and economic well-being is to focus on social and economic issues like family finances, housing, retirement, health care, drug abuse, child abuse, and child care.
that influence the material, emotional, and psychological well-being of individuals and families.

6. *Improving nutrition and diet* is to focus on the economics, safety, nutritional quality and composition of food as a concern of consumers and the food industry.

7. *Revitalizing rural America* is to focus on helping rural areas increase their economic and social viability by working with local governments and other organizations to strengthen rural enterprises and human services, as well as to train skilled community leaders.

8. *Water quality* is to focus on reaching an understanding among diverse audiences of the importance of high-quality groundwater and adopting practices to conserve and make wise use of water resources.

9. *Youth at risk* is to focus on improving the lives of young people, their families and communities by addressing issues like school dropouts, job preparation, teenage sexuality, fitness, stress, and self-esteem.

These nine initiatives reflect what has been described as the "paradigm shift" that Cooperative Extension is experiencing as it evaluates its structure, rules, values, and operation (Dalgaard Brazel, Liles, Sanderson, & Taylor-Powell, 1988). Such a comprehensive evaluation is needed if the Cooperative Extension Service is to transform itself from an industrial-age to an information-age organization (see Coleman & Barranti, 1988; Patton, 1985; 1987a) by: a) adopting new and more effective marketing strategies to reach more diverse audiences (see Astroth & Robbins, 1987; Boldt, 1987; Patton, 1987b; Raymond, 1987); b) proactively addressing cutting-edge issues (see Coleman & Barranti, 1988; Van Horn, Heasley, & Preston, 1985); c) matching subject matters and the needs of different audiences to the growing number of teaching methods available (see Cole, 1981); and d) successfully recruiting tomorrow's pool of Cooperative Extension professionals (see Patton 1987c).

**WORK ROLES OF COOPERATIVE EXTENSION AGENTS AND SPECIALISTS**

It is impossible to cover in detail the variety of subject matter and administrative positions available in the Cooperative Extension Service at the county, district and state levels. The remainder of this paper will therefore be limited to a general discussion of two positions --- the extension agent and the family life specialist. Both are similar in that they are entry level and subject matter positions, as opposed to administrative positions, and they are the positions about which undergraduate and graduate students majoring in family studies usually have the most questions.

*Extension Agents*

Students with a baccalaureate or master's degree in family studies typically seek an extension agent position. In traditional Cooperative Extension organizations, extension agents carry a specific county assignment with responsibilities that may include program work in home economics, 4-H, and community resource development. However, several states, in line with the 1987 Cooperative Extension evaluation report summarized above, have begun to employ "Area Agents" who work in only one or two subject matter areas and deliver programs in several adjacent counties. This modification in personnel assignments and organizational operation is significant, since it reflects a commitment
to provide educational programs to the public by the most effective and cost-efficient means possible.

Regardless of their particular subject matter or geographic assignment, most extension agents deal with a set of general work responsibilities. These include designing and conducting educational programs, workshops, and seminars; reaching and teaching ethnic minority audiences; training and supervising volunteers; organizing community groups; networking with individuals and community agencies; creating radio, TV, and video program materials; learning to use computer delivery techniques; and evaluating educational programs.

**Family Life Specialists**

Family Life Specialists (also listed by other titles) hold a graduate degree, usually a doctorate, in a wide range of subject matter fields, including home economics, sociology, psychology, human development, early childhood education, theology, and gerontology. Specialists are housed on the campuses of land grant universities and have statewide responsibilities as resource supports for extension agents. In their resource role, family life specialists function as a bridge between the academic world and the applied needs of individuals and families (Burcalow, Copeland, & Fisher, 1981). They network with extension agents, state organizations, and resident teaching/research faculty to identify the educational needs of target audiences, seek-out and interpret relevant research findings, apply these findings through programs that meet the needs of the target audiences, and evaluate their programs.

One of the ways in which family life specialists apply research is through the development of educational training packages (e.g., lesson guides, transparencies, videos, slides, handouts) for use by extension agents. Inservice programs are conducted to train agents in the use of these packages, as well as to update agents on current issues related to child and family life. Informational pamphlets, newspaper articles, and newsletters for the lay reader are other ways in which family life specialists fulfill their educational resource role. Specialists also serve as a professional resource in more proactive ways. This may include serving on professional conference committees, delivering professional presentations to colleagues or government agencies, and sitting on task forces that address child and family issues.

Family life specialists also are expanding their work through the use of educational programs that employ the latest technology, including videotapes, computers, and telecommunications. It is anticipated that emphasis will continue to be placed on the utilization of new technology as an effective and cost-efficient means of reaching state, regional, and national audiences.

Finally, because family life specialists hold doctorates, many are in tenure-track positions and hold rank in academic departments. In some cases, these individuals hold split appointments that include teaching or research responsibilities. Family life specialists holding split appointments have the unique challenge of structuring their work schedule so that it is kept in proportion to assigned responsibilities.

**Work Role Requirements**

Employment within Cooperative Extension, like that in other large organizations, carries with it certain work role requirements. For example, most extension agents and specialists would agree that they must be flexible in expecting the unexpected. As
mentioned earlier, agents and especially specialists use the state as their classroom. This means that no two programs are ever exactly the same and thus must be continually adapted to new audiences and situations.

Extension professionals must quickly come to "know" their audience in order to place their remarks and delivery in a framework that will have meaning for those in attendance. A program presented one week to clients with a low level of education may need to be modified the next week for delivery to a highly educated audience. Extension professional must also be aware of and respect the mores of the communities in which they work, since violation of community values can destroy the extension agent's or specialist's credibility.

Extension professionals must be willing and able to quickly alter their delivery methods, since their programs may need to be shortened, lengthened, or in some other way modified to coincide with last minute room arrangements, enrollments, or other unexpected events. It is not uncommon for an extension agent or specialist to arrive at a location only to find the meeting room too small for the planned activity or the participants unresponsive to a delivery method that only last week was a huge success. Other hazards associated with teaching on location include equipment malfunctions, low turn-out due to adverse weather, and insufficient time to discuss in detail the concerns of participants.

It is because of the need to be flexible that extension professionals must also be creative. Developing new activities and delivery methods at the last minute, while frustrating, tends to strengthen one's creative problem-solving skills. And creativity is often essential to keeping a night program interesting for clients who have just completed a full workday.

The need for creativity seems especially important for extension professionals working in the area of home economics. A recent study addressing the work interests of extension agents with responsibilities in agriculture and home economics found that while agriculture agents were more realistic and investigative in their work interests, home economics agents were more artistic (Kittrell & McCracken, 1983). This finding may reflect the different types of extension work associated with agriculture and home economics. Extension professionals in agriculture often deal with factual, concrete issues such as the "do's and don'ts" of successful crop production or animal husbandry. In contrast, extension professionals in home economics deal with value laden human issues that often have no clear answers. A degree of sensitivity and creativity is needed to successfully deal with such complex issues as teenage pregnancy, parenting, and the management of work and family life.

A final work role requirement within Cooperative Extension is self-confidence. The lack of a stable teaching environment and audience can be distracting, requiring that extension professionals have self-confidence in their expertise, delivery methods, and social skills. This means that, on the one hand, they must have the courage to accept the evaluations of their audiences, while, on the other hand, realistically balance these evaluations against their own performance assessment.

The above work role requirements describe the nature of Cooperative Extension work as much as the traits of those who carry out that work. It is for this reason that the authors suggest that highly focused individuals needing a great deal of day-to-day sameness in their lives may have problems adjusting to the constant change and ambiguity of Cooperative Extension work. In contrast, individuals who are flexible,
creative, and self-confident are more likely to find work in Cooperative Extension both challenging and rewarding.

THE STRESSORS AND REWARDS OF COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Cooperative Extension can at times be demanding, requiring a high time commitment and sense of personal involvement (St. Pierre, 1984). It is for this reason that students need to consider the stressors and rewards associated with employment in Cooperative Extension.

Among the most frequently mentioned stressors is the demand placed on the extension professional's time (Coleman & Barranti, 1989; St. Pierre, 1984). Evening and weekend work is sometimes required, and the high public profile that sometimes accompanies extension work can likewise compete with one's personal time. Fortunately, some state Cooperative Extension organizations have begun to conduct research studies (see Bowers, 1989; Patterson & McCubbin, 1984; St. Pierre, 1984) and staff conferences (Thomson, Kiernan, St. Pierre, & Lewis 1987) aimed at helping extension professionals to balance their extension work and family life demands.

Many rewards also are associated with work in Cooperative Extension. The multifaceted roles assumed by extension professionals offer a degree of flexibility in planning one's work projects (Coleman & Barranti, 1989; St. Pierre, 1984). And, as mentioned earlier, there are a growing number of opportunities for the more creative and adventuresome to adopt new technology in the development and delivery of Cooperative Extension programs.

Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of extension work is the psychological and social benefits that come from serving the community. Employment with Cooperative Extension has been described as being much more than a job, since by its very nature extension work fits the definition of a "calling" (Patterson & McCubbin, 1984).

* The rewards of the work are predominantly psychological and social, with monetary reward not necessarily compensating for the amount of effort expended.

* The worker receives feelings of esteem from the community because the nature of the work requires self sacrifice and dedication.

* Efforts are focused on goals that transcend individual self interest for the good of the community.

The personal satisfaction that extension agents and family life specialists receive from their work can create the energy and positive feedback that puts the long hours, night work, and travel into perspective. With this in mind, students interested in an extension career may find it helpful to consider their primary sources of motivation and from what type of rewards they derive the most satisfaction. We suggest that students who are extrinsically motivated may find the work conducted in Cooperative Extension unrewarding, while students who are intrinsically motivated may be more likely to derive greater satisfaction from the feeling that they are making a difference in the lives of people and are contributing to their state's standard of living.
PREPARATION FOR
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION EMPLOYMENT

Cooperative Extension work, like other areas of employment, has certain prerequisites. While preparation begins with completion of a college degree, there are also educational experiences that students can take advantage of to better prepare themselves for a Cooperative Extension position. Students can best develop an appreciation of the day-to-day work in Cooperative Extension by arranging for an internship at the county or state level. If an internship is not possible, volunteer work can be substituted since volunteers play an important role in the delivery of many extension programs.

It is important to note that undergraduate and graduate interns or volunteers will in most cases be assigned different duties. Undergraduates are more likely to be supervised by extension agents or specialists and work in close cooperation with others to complete a project. Graduate students are more likely to be given greater independence in researching a problem and developing program delivery and evaluation strategies. Whatever their class standing, the authors advise students with an interest in Cooperative Extension to visit the family life specialists at their land grant university. These specialists can supply the information and assistance needed to develop a meaningful internship program.

Yet another factor that can prepare students for a career in Cooperative Extension is personal life experiences. Because extension professionals have a human service orientation, any life experience involving helping, teaching, and organizational skills can be beneficial in preparing students for an extension agent or specialist position. For example, volunteer work in human service, civic, or religious settings can help students develop an empathic style of relating to others that is essential in working with the public.

CONCLUSION

We began this chapter by referring to the Cooperative Extension Service as the "the largest problem-solving educational system in the world." Having now reviewed this system, we propose that it is through the dedicated work of extension agents and family life specialists that the necessary link between university research and educational application is made that allows Cooperative Extension to fulfill its mission of assisting individuals, families, and communities to improve their standard of living.

REFERENCES
