

Grand Challenge #1: The Future of Extension: Alternative Delivery Mechanisms?

In commemorating the 100th year of the passing of the Smith-Lever Act in 2014,¹ six grand challenges for the future of Extension were proposed. First, Extension must find new and innovative approaches to sustainable intensification of agricultural and food production systems providing for abundant, safe, and nutritious food in the context of climate change, diminishing land and water resources, and the expectation of better health outcomes. Second, Extension must adapt its very successful rural model to meet the challenges of an urban, poorer, and more ethnically diverse audience. Third, Extension has a critical role to play in helping reverse the health crisis in America by helping inculcate better food choices, active lifestyles, and better behavior choices. Fourth, Extension must continue to be a dynamic network able to mobilize people, resources, and ideas driven by the local needs. Fifth, Extension must use its educational network to lead society to preserve and protect our natural resources, air, water, and land in the context of climate change. Finally, Extension must leverage the power of the land-grant university by being fully integrated into the land-grant university mission.

Extension derives its programmatic funding from federal, state, and counties sources, which can facilitate innovation. Unfortunately, justifying funding to fully support Extension capacity is an ongoing challenge in today's competitive budgetary environment, especially at federal and state levels. In recent years, proposed budget cuts to Extension have become an annual affair in many states and in some cases, eliminating Extension has been proposed. Many rural counties are also under pressure to implement budget cuts to Extension.

University Extension has responded to budget cuts in various ways, including eliminating positions and programs, reorganization, reprioritization, and streamlining or creating new delivery mechanisms. County-based Extension offices are replaced with district or regional offices. Subject-matter specialists cover larger and larger geographical areas, many times statewide. Field specialist increasingly rely on technology like Google Chat and Skype and offer online tutorials and webinars.

Today, Extension remains active in nearly all of the nation's 3,000 counties, but demographic and budgetary shifts have prompted major changes in how it does business. With fewer full-time employees—the size of the full-time workforce dropped 22 percent from 1980 to 2010, from 17,009 to 13,294 full-time workers—Extension now relies heavily on nearly three million trained volunteers and its eXtension website to disseminate information. Yet it remains a target of criticism for many. “For nearly 100 years, the University of [a state university] Extension Service has annually taken hundreds of thousands in local property taxes from every county, set up district and local commissions, built countless buildings and provided programs on youth, family science, community and economic development. Yet [my region] remains poverty-ridden, low achieving and very unhealthy,” a community member wrote in an opinion article.²

How will the land-grant system respond to this challenge?

¹ Henning, Jimmy et al. 2014. Milestones and the Future for Cooperative Extension. *Journal of Extension*, 52(6).

² Marsha Mercer. September 09, 2014. Cooperative Extension Reinvents Itself for the 21st Century. *Stateline: The Pew Charitable Trusts*.