ESO 1486

9.04
1486

AGR. ECON. & RUR. SOC. The Missing Blueprint for Progress

REF. ROOM #242

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

2120 FYFFE RD.

COLUMBUS, OHIO 43210 What The Extension Futures Report Failed to Do¹

or

Dennis R. Henderson²

RECEIVED

AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS
STUDY BUREAUA General Perspective

In a nutshell, I found the report of the Futures Task Force to the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP), entitled "Extension in Transition: Bridging the Gap Between Vision and Reality", to be an insightful indictment of Extension. It also widely misses the mark. When viewed in toto the report does present a reasonably accurate assessment of many problems and issues currently facing Extension, offers some useful suggestions as to the types of things that could be done to deal with these problems, and fails completely in setting forth a meaningful way to bring about desired change. In the end, the report is trapped by its own criticism. The Task Force would have been well advised to give more heed to the warning of Neil Sampson when he wrote "...some of Extension's most notable successes in the past predict its future least accurately."

My intent is to do four things: (1) highlight the issues identified in the report that I believe typify problems that Extension must resolve in order to carry out a viable educational mission in the years ahead, (2) characterize the essence of what the Task Force appears to believe that Extension ought to do to resolve its problems, as **implied** by its

¹ Invited paper prepared for the Annual Meeting, American Agricultural Economics Association, Knoxville, Tennessee. July 31-August 3, 1988.

² Professor, Agricultural Economics, Ohio State University.
Appreciation for helpful comments is expressed to Joseph Havlicek, Jr. and Warren F. Lee.

recommendations and supporting rationale, (3) assess what Extension is likely to look like in the future if the recommendations are carried out literally, and (4) present an alternative strategy that, I believe, has greater potential for bringing about a relevant mission for extension education. The latter point is, I suggest, what the Task Force failed to do in its obvious attempt not to offend Extension as we know it now.

To its credit, the Task Force did convey some sense of what is wrong with Extension. I compiled a list of 12 such problems embodied in the report. I do not present this as a complete list, nor does it necessarily correspond in entirety with the consensus of the Task Force. Rather, these 12 points are criticisms of Extension that can be identified in the report and that are consistent with my own experiences and perceptions.

My list picks up on page 1, where the report states that Extension "tends to be a protector of the status quo." This statement is supplemented by a marginal quotation from President Lick of the University of Maine: "Extension appears to be more concerned with...doing things right, rather than doing the right things." I concur. Much that occurs in Extension--long range planning, national initiatives, program committees and such--seems to be more concerned with maintaining Extension as an organization than with enhancing its mission. Indeed, as I will argue directly, the recommendations of the Task Force are themselves more self-serving of the organization than of its mission. At least to the outside observer, it appears that the Task Force, after presenting a rather insightful assessment of what is wrong with Extension, decided to placate defenders of the current organization rather than put forward proposals for fundamental change.

Other things on my list of identifiable problems include: (1) some extension programs are conducted based on an inadequate knowledge base, sometimes resulting from limited working relationships between Extension and colleges other than agriculture and home economics, (2) a lack of clarity exists in the roles and responsibilities of the county, state/university, and federal participants in Extension, (3) there is a widening gap between the image of Extension that is held by many extension workers and by the public, (4) because of inadequate integration between discipline-based programs, the burden of obtaining a comprehensive education from Extension rests primarily on the students (who are called clientele in Extension rhetoric), (5) there is overstaffing in administrative and program leadership positions relative to teaching positions, (6) the organization adheres to county and state boundaries that are inconsequential to the mission, (7) organizational change has occurred more slowly than would be suggested by changes in Extension's environment, (8) many of Extension's clientele obtain new information sooner than does their extension agent, (9) many of Extension's traditional clientele are by-passing extension agents and obtaining knowledge directly from state specialists, university faculty and others, (10) sometimes poor or no coordination exists between Extension and research activities at land grant universities, and (11) there is an immediate need but reluctance for change in Extension operations in order for the organization to carry out its mission.

A Characterization of the Recommendations

Also to the Task Force's credit, the report was not limited to an assessment of problems faced by Extension. It does offer some useful insight into what changes are needed. With 32 separate recommendations, one

would believe that much of the report is given to what ought to be done, as well as how to do it. Unfortunately, the case isn't quite so clear. Many of the specific recommendations seem to be little more than statements of traditional beliefs, and offer little guidance for establishing a sense of future mission. For example, recommendation 21, stating that "The three traditional sources of funding (federal, state, and local) should remain in place", conveys little about what the Task Force believes Extension ought to do (mission) or how to do it (organization and operations). Even the supporting rationale offers no help, e.g. "The Implication is not that program content be dictated by each source of funding, but the system clearly has the responsibility of program delivery regarding issues of interest to each funding source" (p.14). This seems to me much like a merchant saying to a customer, "I'll take your money and provide you with a product that I am sure you should have."

To get a sense of what the Task Force intended for Extension to do, the recommendations and supporting discussion really need to be viewed in their totality. That is, needed actions are more implicit in the report than explicit in its individual recommendations. I compiled another list. This one has eight points. These capture the essence of what I find in the report to be meritorious recommendations regarding future mission and needed accomplishments. As with my listing of problems, this list is not a comprehensive outline of what the Task Force stated. Rather, it represents things that the Task Force identified that I perceive as being responsive to the problems and opportunities faced by Extension at this point in its history. There may be some message simply in the observation that I could identify 12 problem areas in the report but only eight potential solutions.

My second list picks up on page 2 of the report, to wit: "...the system must restate its mission, develop a vision for the future, and formulate plans for the necessary transition to achieve desired change" (emphasis in original). Because I wholeheartedly agree with this statement, it encouraged me to study the report in detail in order to identify what is, in the view of the Task Force, this vision of the future and its implications for extension's mission. To this end, the report recognizes that the "...most noted function of the Cooperative Extension Service is education" (p. 30) and apparently the Task Force believes it should continue to be so. As part of its first recommendation the Task Force states that the mission should "...enunciat(e) the system's role as a nationwide university-based educational resource..." (p. 5). I accept this view and base much of the balance of my comments on such a premise. Those who believe that the basic the mission of Extension is something other than education will find much to criticize in my remaining comments.

List 2, point 2: "...Extension must improve its ability to anticipate future issues..." (p. 3). I would rephrase this to say that Extension must improve its ability to prepare its **students** (clientele) to anticipate future issues. It would be even better to say that Extension must improve its ability to anticipate the kinds of knowledge that its students will need to deal with future issues. I believe that Extension does not, nor do the land grant universities for that matter, have sufficient wisdom to identify every reasonably important issue that some individual or some group of clientele are likely to face in the future. Rather, an important product of the educational process, Extension notwithstanding, is to improve the ability of students to perceive emerging problems as well as to identify and assess

alternative solutions and to make intelligent choices. As will become clear momentarily, this perspective is the dominate theme in my assessment of where the Task Force failed.

Other points on my list of Task Force-identified solutions include: (3) more integration between the extension and research missions of the land grant university system, (4) strengthen the tie between Extension and other academic units (particularly those outside colleges of agriculture and home economics) to achieve university-wide involvement in the mission of Extension, (5) expansion of the knowledge base upon which Extension builds its educational efforts, (6) emphasize the augmentation of human capital as the central thrust of Extension's mission, that is, strive to improve the intelligence of its student clientele, (7) more effort should be expended on delivering knowledge that helps students identify and solve problems rather than serving as a conduit for transferring information from researchers to clientele, and (8) as a change agent, rather than emphasizing the transfer of technology, Extension should concentrate on enhancing the ability of people to think.

The Implicit Intent of the Recommendations

The report does allow the reader who has a fairly broad perspective on the organization itself and who does not take the Task Force's prescriptions too literally to identify potential solutions to some of the issues facing Extension. Nonetheless, it is not difficult to interpret the recommendations as self-serving to the organization as we know it rather than to its mission as we envision it. To illustrate: the essence of recommendations such as 4, 5 and 13 is that Extension should emphasize programs that utilize the expertise of extension personnel to solve problems

that are likely to be faced by its clientele. For example, "The compelling issues facing people must drive the system..." and "...clientele...should be identified through a process that selects the most critical issues within the scope of expertise available to the system." Later in the report this theme is carried to the point that, regarding youth, "prevention" programs are called for (part of the rationale for recommendation 29), presumably to encourage people not to do things deemed undesirable by Extension.

In this same vein, recommendations such as 7, 9, 12 and 17 specify that "Aggressive...decision making must be provided at the state level...with federal and state leadership...assum(ing) responsibility for initiating and implementing...multicounty or regional issue-response teams...(and that) one or more Extension staff members should be continued at the county level." The sense of these recommendations is that state and federal administrators should get on with identifying what are the priority problems to be resolved for people by Extension, and that local Extension workers should get busy resolving these problems. This seems to be pretty much a restatement of how Extension already approaches program development, that is, decide what (some) people ought to or ought not to do, and then get the word out.

Insight into what the Task Force has in mind for Extension in the future can be gained from selected highlights of recommendations regarding organization and structure. I have already mentioned recommendation 21 regarding maintenance of federal, state and local funding and number 17 calling for continuation of county staffing. Recommendation 22 is for an evaluation system that documents the value of Extension to funding decision makers. Recommendations 23, 24, 25, 26 and 27 put forward four program areas for organizational attention: agriculture, communities, families, and

youth. For example, number 23 states that "The technology needs of agriculture must be served..." and number 24 states that "Extension must...be a recognized source for...programming that the entire spectrum of community, family, and youth organizations may utilize..."

At least implicitly, the vision of Extension's future in the Task Forces's recommendations appears to be a federal-state-county partnership that conducts programs for agriculture, communities, families and youth on issues and problems that the organization identifies and justifies as important. Regrettably, this strikes me more as a vision of the past, more a defense of the status quo, than a blueprint for accomplishing the eight (more or less) things on the list of potential solutions to the 12 (more or less) critical problems facing Extension.

In the end, it appears that the Task Force has fallen under the spell of its own first criticism, that is, that Extension is more concerned with preserving its current organization than in pursuing a visionary mission for the future. I note this with great sadness, for I believe that there is an important mission for extension education, and that the Task Force's own identification of current problems and needs is instructive in deciphering what that mission should be. Unfortunately, the report provides few innovative suggestions on ways of bringing it about.

An Alternative Strategy

Having defined the problem, as a sometime extension policy educator I am now tempted to apply the "Purdue alternatives and implications approach." This approach was once described to me as: present four options, three of which have such obvious limitations that people will quickly recognize the merit of your favored solution. Meaning no disrespect to our Purdue

colleagues, I will nonetheless skip the first three alternatives and go straight to my recommendations.

As I suggested at the outset, I have little argument with the Task Force's sense of what Extension ought to be about in the future. I disagree vehemently, however, on how to do it. In short, I believe that a federal-state-county partnership providing people with information on what to do or not do regarding actual or perceived problems related to agriculture, communities, families and youth is not a very promising way to carry out the mission of extension education. I contend that such a model has been tested, was found to be productive at one time, but for reasons such as those identified by the Task Force itself, is now wanting. Among the most telling reasons is, many of its students (clientele) are better educated and better informed than are many of its teachers (agents).

In my view, which seems reasonably consistent with many of the statements of the Task Force, the mission of extension is primarily one of providing off-campus education that will help people further develop their cognitive ability to assess and resolve real-world problems. The report itself says it best with these words: "The function of education to engender **problem solution**, rather than the more static concept of education for **knowledge transfer**, cannot be overstressed. The Extension network professional of the future must educate to permit positive change in human capital..." (pp. 18-19, emphasis in original).

Note that I do not capitalize extension when I speak of its mission, whereas the Task Force consistently used the big "E" version. This signals their concern with Extension as a formal organization. By contrast, I believe that the educational mission of extension is generic, referring to

the process of educating people to solve real world problems. Perhaps it is more accurate to characterize it as career education; helping people gain the cognitive skills that they need to be successful in their chosen career, be that vocational or an avocation. As an organization, Extension does not have a monopoly on its mission but does, and should, compete with other providers of career-oriented education.

With this concept of mission, one can ask: How does extension's mission differ from that of land grant universities? Begging the question of how well the land grants are carrying out their mission, I contend that the difference is not great. It is more a matter of delivery and type of student. Regarding delivery, Extension has a long-established practice of taking the classroom to the student. This I applaud, and hold it as a guiding beacon for extension's future. I am encouraged at the willingness, even aggressiveness of many extension educators in adopting innovative methods for extending the classroom to remote and multiple locations--using such techniques as computer networks, satellite broadcasting and interactive video. Kudos to the Task Force for endorsing more of this.

With regard to the type of student, extension's mission is also somewhat unique within the the land grant university complex. Most of the university focuses on post-secondary students who have not yet, or are just in the process of settling on a career path. In concept, land grant universities would be expected to have an orientation to post-secondary students who have at least tentative career ambitions related to the production sciences. However, in reality today's students at most land grants are barely distinguishable from their liberal arts counterparts. Extension, by contrast, clearly focuses on career-oriented clientele--most

of whom are actively engaged in pursuing a career by the time they become extension students. Such a student focus is entirely consistent with the vision of extension's mission to assist learners in developing the intellectual ability to solve real world problems. As with the land grants in general, there seems to be no good rationale to limit extension's student body to those whose careers ties them, directly or indirectly, to the soil.

The more compelling question is, what should extension teach? Contrary to the apparent intent of the Task Force's recommendations, I believe that there is no longer a compelling justification for using public funds to teach farmers how to farm, women how to cook and sew, youth how to socialize, or communities how to raise taxes. The compelling need is to teach career-oriented people how to further develop, use and improve their cognitive skills, that is, how to become better thinkers.

Universities have long been teaching people how to improve their skills as thinkers. This has been done primarily through the trilogy of lessons, courses, and curricula. Individual faculty carry most of the responsibility for the first, department faculty for the second, and university faculty for the third. With regard to learning, lessons are of only marginal value unless they contribute to a course, and courses are of value mainly as they contribute to curricula. Content of all three is a product of intellectual intercourse, which increases with each step in the trilogy. At the curricula level, the collective judgement of the faculty comes to bear to define, in essence, what constitutes the "educated person." All who have ever been involved know that this is not a perfect process, yet most would be hard-pressed to devise a better scheme. Certainly, few would advocate

the substitution of directives from university administration or state and federal governments.

The lesson-course-curricula trilogy is, I suggest, a useful model to adapt to extension education. Hire good faculty, representing a university-wide array of disciplines and professions, and let them interactively define what constitutes an educated career-oriented person. The faculty can then translate this into corresponding curricula for which courses and lessons are designed and delivered to off-campus learners. This could be carried to the point of certification upon successful completion by granting a diploma or degree. However, this may not be as important to extension clientele as to on-campus students, mainly because extension students learn to advance in a career whereas the more typical university students learn primarily to get started in a career.

The potential benefits of this approach are manifold. First, it would clearly establish education, not organizational maintenance, as the mission of extension. Second, it would put the process of deciding what ought to be taught into the hands of intellectuals--persons who know what there is to teach and who combine their knowledge to set forth a vision of what kinds of learning experiences will help improve the cognitive, problem-solving skills of students who are already vested in a career. Because good educators are by definition also good knowledge seekers (i.e. researchers), they are motivated to not only bring the most up-to-date knowledge to their students but also to go out and discover more. Thus, the need to integrate research and extension would be achieved by default.

Third, it should both encourage and facilitate greater involvement of university-wide faculty in extension education, bringing a broader array of

knowledge and expertise to bear. Fourth, it would force extension educators to consider each lesson within the broader context of courses and a total learning experience, instead of an exercise in information transfer. Fifth, rather than exposing extension students to a seemingly random hodge-podge of disparate lessons, they would receive a coordinated and integrated learning experience. In the end, it would enhance human capital by creating new abilities to identify and solve real world problems, rather than simply transmitting information on what the clientele ought or ought not do.

Can a curricula approach be implemented? Traditionally, Extension has done the lesson well; the course poorly; the curricula not at all. Organizationally, it has been better structured to present lessons than to develop and implement courses and curricula. On the other hand, land grant universities have vast experience and a reasonably good track record with the latter. Perhaps by integrating the ability of extension educators to deliver lessons with the ability of the university faculty to identify, plan and implement comprehensive higher education, the mission of extension can survive well-meaning but ill-advised attempts, such as the report by the ECOP Futures Task Force, to preserve its organizational structure.

References

- Extension Committee on Organization and Policy. "Extension in Transition: Bridging the Gap Between Vision and Reality." Report of the Futures Task Force. Virginia Cooperative Extension Service, November 1987.
- Knudson, Ronald D. "Restructuring Agricultural Economics Extension to Meet Changing Needs." American Journal of Agricultural Economics, 68:5, pp.1297-1306 (December 1986).
- Sampson, R. Neil. "The Cooperative Extension Service--Its Structure: Its Future." Statement before the Task Force on the Future of the Extension Service, Washington, D.C., June 5, 1987.