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### Extension Stakeholder Engagement: Adapting to the Twenty-First Century

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#### Recommended Citation

French, C. & Morse, G. 2015. Extension Stakeholder Engagement: Adapting to the Twenty-First Century. *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension*. Special Issue: The Cooperative Extension Program Development Model, Volume 3, Number 2.

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## **Extension Stakeholder Engagement: An Exploration of Two Cases Exemplifying 21<sup>st</sup> Century Adaptions**

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*Over the past 100 years, a number of societal trends have influenced how Cooperative Extension engages public audiences in its outreach and education efforts. These trends include rapid evolution in communication technology, greater specialization of Land-Grant University faculty, and diversification of funding sources. In response, Extension organizations have adapted their engagement approach, incorporated new technologies, modified their organizational structures, and even expanded the notion of public stakeholders to include funders, program nonparticipants, and others. This article explores the implications for future Extension efforts using two case studies—one which explores how a community visioning program incorporated new ways of engaging local audiences, and another which explores how an Extension business retention program used participatory action research and educational organizing approaches to strengthen participation in a research-based program.*

*Keywords:* Cooperative Extension, Extension, community development, stakeholder engagement, Millennials, stakeholder, participatory action research, educational organizing

Cooperative Extension (Extension) has evolved its approach to engaging the public in program development and implementation for over a century in response to an ever-changing societal context and client needs. Extension's adaptive approach has helped it garner grassroots support and demonstrate public value during much of its time (Rasmussen, 1989; Rogers, 1995). Yet, the world is in the midst of multiple transitions that impact the way stakeholders—individuals or groups affected by a particular issue, effort, or topic of focus by Extension—seek out and access education and resources.

Extension leaders broadly recognize that public engagement in program development and implementation necessitates real-time communication and information-sharing with technology-savvy audiences; collaboration across multiple sectors at the regional and multi-state level; and a deeper understanding of the needs of nontraditional audiences, such as Hispanics, Millennials,

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and urban residents (Morse, 2009). Yet, these changes are cultural shifts that have been advocated for years and are difficult to implement (McDowell, 2001; Seevers & Graham, 2012; Seevers, Graham, Gamon, & Conklin, 1997). The challenge for Extension organizations is that they will have to continuously adapt to change to be effective at engaging diverse stakeholders.

This paper explores trends impacting the way Extension education participants seek education and information and the implications for how Extension engages its audiences. These trends are exemplified through two case studies. The first case study illustrates how Extension modified its program delivery model to adapt to changing societal trends and client needs. The second case study examines how an Extension program uses participatory action research and educational organizing to secure local engagement in a community economic development project.

### **The Evolution of Extension's Public Engagement**

When Cooperative Extension was established by the Smith Lever Act of 1914, a Progressive Era philosophy had taken root: a philosophy that social conditions, not individualistic behaviors, lead to poverty (Green & Haines, 2012). This philosophy was based in the idea that raising peoples' standard of living required large-scale, place-based programs to lay the foundation for advancing rural America through promotion of new technologies and workforce skills. By integrating education and technical expertise, Extension provided training and technical expertise to rural Americans in agriculture and the mechanic arts (Rasmussen, 1989).

In early Extension programs, the solutions and their implementation were largely expert-driven. This raised concerns about the possibility of public stakeholders becoming dependent upon technical expertise provided by Land-Grant institutions (LGUs) (Green & Haines, 2012). By the mid-1920s, Extension began to shape a new form of audience engagement that leveraged the ideas and skills of participants by the recruiting and training of volunteers to deliver programs (Seevers & Graham, 2012). Volunteers relied on technical expertise from academic institutions, but they were part of the communities that Extension served. In this regard, Extension's train-the-trainer emphasis on engaging volunteers and developing their capacity helped alleviate concerns about creating a dependency relationship between university scientists and community members. This volunteer emphasis included the incorporation of Extension Advisory Councils, which were set up to advise county-level programming, as well as garner support for Extension (Seevers & Graham, 2012).

The New Deal programs in the 1930s posed a new wrinkle in interfacing with stakeholders. With the rollout of large-scale government programs like price supports and rural electrification, Extension was asked by the Department of Agriculture to play a role as promoter of programs, signifying a shift from its former role as an educator and capacity builder (Rasmussen, 1989). Extension no doubt helped make the New Deal programs successful, but it lost some of its ability

to respond to client-identified needs in the process. According to National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) archives, food shortages during World War II further extended Extension's role as a promoter of programs, such as the Victory Garden movement, placing emphasis on boosting agricultural production, reducing erosion, and training farm labor (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, n.d.).

President Johnson's Great Society in the 1960s brought new winds of change, pushing Extension to engage nontraditional audiences, such as low-income households, minorities, and nonfarm-related industry sectors like commercial fishing (Seevers & Graham, 2012). Extension expanded its focus to topics such as rural development and urban blight. The latter topic followed the implementation of urban renewal programs in America's inner cities, where Extension helped many neighborhoods address unintended consequences of urban renewal (Cunningham, 1972).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Extension expanded its reach to nontraditional audiences and addressed topics such as renewable energy, workforce development, housing, and environmental change. Many of the programs established during this period sought to engage communities and groups, as opposed to individuals. For example, Extension provided training and organizational support to migrant workers who labored at farms and orchards (Seevers & Graham, 2012).

By the early 1990s, Extension had established a national reputation as a convener of dialogue and facilitator of community change, as exemplified by the emergence of community visioning programs across the country (Walzer, 1996). However, cuts to Extension budgets in the 1990s and 2000s forced Extension to focus its limited resources, and in some cases, discontinue certain programs. Resource constraints forced Extension to become more efficient at program delivery, which necessitated increased use of electronic communications and delivery of information via the World Wide Web starting in the late 1990s (Gregg, 2002).

### **Extension's Public Engagement Today**

Though Extension evolved its engagement strategies to address ever-changing audiences and societal needs, some scholars purport that Extension lost its engagement roots starting in the late 1990s. Peters (2002) notes that Extension's role shifted from that of community convener and capacity builder to research agenda promoter. This shift harkens back to Extension's early 20<sup>th</sup> Century roots when it was principally a purveyor of technical expertise (Seevers & Graham, 2012). This may explain growing public sentiment throughout the 1990s that Extension was not meeting its public engagement mission (Franklin, 2009; Kelsey, 2002; Peters, 2002).

The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities published a 1999 report stating that Land-Grant Universities (LGUs) needed to go beyond public service and traditional outreach—including Extension—and transition to true engagement. The term

*engagement* connotes a two-way relationship between institutions of higher education and community partners in a manner that builds reciprocity, fosters trust, and focuses on shared goals (Franz, 2009; French et al., 2013). A 2005 survey of LGUs found these institutions and Extension organizations have modified their missions to encompass key engagement principles put forth in the Kellogg report (Byrne, 2006). Faculty members have also incorporated broader impact goals into their research and increased partnerships with Extension on projects and proposals (Byrne, 2006).

Peters (2002) identified one form of engagement as *educational organizing* and described it as the work of developing leadership; building civic capacity; and facilitating learning through bringing people and resources together to identify, deliberate about, and act on important public issues and problems. In a second form of engaged outreach and scholarship, Greenwood, Whyte, and Harkavy (1993) described *participatory action research* as one in which “authority over and execution of research is a highly collaborative process between expert researchers and members of the organization under study” (pp. 174). Both are relevant for Extension, going back to the days of corn demonstration farm plots (Rasmussen, 1989).

The following sections identify key stakeholders of Extension programs and current trends changing the game for how Extension engages with public stakeholders.

### **The Role of Stakeholders in Extension Program Development and Delivery**

The term *stakeholders* is often used to refer only to participants who are in the target of the educational activities. Mayeske (1994), as cited in Seevers and Graham (2012), defined stakeholders more broadly as:

people who have a vested interest in the program. They can include many individuals: people who participate in the program, Extension personnel, Extension organizational leaders, community leaders, individuals and/or organizations providing funding or other resources to the program, other community professionals who co-sponsor a program, potential participants in a program, legislators and others. (p. 105)

While this definition is broader than merely program participants, it understates the complexity of the term. For example, it omits the following groups: national Extension colleagues, nonprofit interest groups that provide a range of services, government and private funders that support the development and implementation of Extension programs, related industries or groups that interact with the target audience, academic researchers on the issues being considered, and evaluation specialists and researchers who may or may not have Extension appointments. Each of the groups identified above is key to the successful development and/or delivery of Extension programs. The following section outlines key roles that each play in Extension.

**Extension professional associations and networks** are critical Extension stakeholders (Jackson et al., 2004; Singletary et al., 2007). They enable the sharing of program materials to address local needs without each institution having to *reinvent the wheel*. Examples of these benefits are the Master Gardener program initiated by Washington State University, now implemented in all 50 states (Langellotto, Moen, Straub, & Dorn, 2015), and the Business Retention and Expansion (BR&E) program started at The Ohio State University, now spread throughout the U.S. and the world (Boyles, 2014).

**Nonprofit interest groups** offer education and political lobbying. In fact, countless international and national groups, as well as state organizations, offer educational programs similar to Extension. Hence, they can either be seen as collaborators or competitors. Developing working relationships with these groups, while maintaining an educational perspective, takes a lot of relationship building and mutual learning. Yet, once partnerships are forged, nonprofit groups can help promote, fund, and even deliver Extension programs (Tuck, Darger, & Ahmed, 2012a).

**Stakeholders-as-funders** are a key source of Extension funding as public resources for Extension decline. In fact, the federal funding for Extension fell from 40% in 1972 to 17% in 2006 (Joint Task Force, 2006). Meanwhile, Extension income from grants and fees grew from 2% in 1972 to 21% in 2003 (Morse, 2009). With declining budgets, states have explored a variety of funding options, such as shifting to a cost recovery model. This requires Extension staff to become familiar with stakeholders-as-funders, including state and federal agencies, small and large foundations, or corporations, such as seed companies, that provide research dollars and resources for agricultural trials (Umali-Deiningner, 1997). This necessitates Extension engaging with new potential funding partners, such as private businesses, as well as direct support from program participants (Pike, 2012; Tuck et al., 2012a).

**Academic department researchers** are essential in solid outreach programs. Research and scholarship is essential in order to provide useful and effective information in a technical transfer approach, as well as to discover and use effective educational organizing and participatory action research (Gagnon, Franz, Garst, & Bumpus, 2015). When it is working at its best, Extension also influences research agendas by providing feedback on how well the work of researchers addresses real-world needs (McDowell, 2001). This will require Extension program teams to engage researchers as key program stakeholders.

**Evaluation specialists and researchers** are key to improving the quality of formative evaluations, summative evaluations, and impact reporting by Extension programs. Extension evaluation specialists also enhance the public value of programs by helping Extension professionals identify and measure the impacts of programs on nonparticipants (Franz, 2011; Kalambokidis, 2004). While many states have a paucity of evaluation specialists, this may

change as pressure mounts for evidence-based programming (Thomas & Pring, 2004; Workman & Scheer, 2012).

**Political constituents** are also key stakeholders, since taxpayers provide most of Extension's base funding, although they may not participate directly in Extension programs. While Extension personnel have learned how to sell their programs to participants, it is not as easy to garner support from nonparticipants. Thus, a great deal of attention is being placed on helping Extension professionals communicate the public value of Extension projects and programs to nonparticipants (Franz, 2011; Franz, Arnold & Baughman, 2014; Haskell & Morse, 2015a, 2015b; Kalambokidis, 2004, 2011).

### **Trends Impacting Audience Engagement and Implications**

The above section focuses mainly on stakeholders that support Extension program development and implementation but are not direct educational program participants. This section explores the trends that impact stakeholders who are clients, or the target audience, of Extension programs. The list of Extension program participants is vast, as Extension is geographically diverse and addresses many different issues. These trends include rapidly changing demographics, emergence of new communications technologies, regionalized and specialized Extension organizational structures, and economic globalization. The following are key trends and how they are impacting Extension audience engagement.

#### **Evolution of Communication Technology**

People, particularly young people, access and share information much differently today than in 1914, let alone 1970. The use of social media, the emergence of real-time information gathering via the web, and the concept of digital classrooms have altered the way many stakeholders engage with people in the workplace, in their communities, and among social circles (Gilbert, 2011). In fact, research suggests that Millennials—individuals born between 1980 and 2000—respond to engagement approaches that utilize technology to enable multitasking, instant feedback, and collaboration with people in other locations (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008). For instance, Extension professionals have adapted to new communication modes, as exemplified by a 4-H program that uses a digital classroom to connect 4-H clubs (West, Fuhrman, Morgan, & Duncan, 2012). But, not all Extension professionals have embraced technology to engage with tech-savvy individuals and need training to do so (Porr et al., 2014). This implies the need to invest in additional professional development in new communication technologies and distance education methods.

### **Rising Audience Educational Levels**

Extension audiences are more educated than they were fifty years ago. For example, only 4% of farmers had college degrees in 1964, compared to 25% in 2006 (Ahearn & Parker, 2009). In 2010, 45% of farm managers had some college, marking an increase from decades ago (Hertz, 2011). Extension participants also have a greater range of educational achievements, including PhDs. Engaging these educationally diverse audiences requires additional professional development in an Extension professional's area of expertise so they can stay current with stakeholders' informational needs (Morse, 2009). As suggested by Gagnon et al. (2015), earning credibility with this diverse set of audiences increases the need for Extension professionals to have evidence-based programs that can deliver high quality results with strong implementation research on how best to do this.

### **Globally Integrated Rural Economies**

Economic well-being for many farm families depends on what happens in the global economy and how those changes ripple out to the nonfarm sectors in their communities, not to mention the impacts of global trends on farm income. Off-farm income exceeds income from farming in rural America (Peel, Doye, & Ahearn, 2013). In fact, more farm operators and their spouses are reporting off-farm jobs as their major source of income. These nonfarm jobs are increasingly integrated into and dependent upon the global economy (Fernandez-Cornejo, 2007). Globalization is influencing the types of programs needed to continue serving participants and to secure support of other stakeholders. As Garst and McCawley (2015) note, this requires strong needs assessment efforts. This implies the need for better in-service training, as more Extension professionals are hired for their expertise in a specific area and lack adult education training.

### **Ethnic and Racial Diversity**

The United States is rapidly becoming a *majority-minority* nation, whereby racial and/or ethnic minorities have become the relative majority of the population (Jacobsen, Kent, Lee, & Mather, 2011). This might be one of the nation's greatest strengths for competing in the global economy (Kotkin, 2010). Yet, this implies that Extension faculty will need to learn how to more effectively engage audiences from diverse backgrounds.

### **Urbanization of Extension's Audience**

Since World War II, rural areas nationally have lost around two-thirds of their population, while metropolitan areas have seen a net gain (Walzer, 2003). This demographic shift has significantly altered audience needs. As one example, Extension focused primarily on serving the agricultural community when it was formed in 1914. However, the number of rural farms has dropped



roughly parallel to that of the rural population. In response, resources that were once allocated to rural farmers have been reallocated to address issues facing urban areas, such as urban blight, youth risk factors, and resource protection (Seevers & Graham, 2012). Yet, expanding programs to reach new audiences while facing financial cuts implies Extension needs to deliver programs regionally (Morse, 2011).

### **Changes in Volunteerism and the Role of Parents**

Putnam (1995) chronicled significant changes to the way that people engage with communities. He postulated that not only are people contributing less volunteer time to community organizations, such as Parent Teachers Organizations (PTOs), but they are also less civically engaged in community life. Others, such as Ladd (1998), contested this notion, pointing out that declining volunteerism in groups like PTOs is merely a result of the fact that institutional structures have not adapted to current times. He noted that volunteers contribute in different ways than they did two or three decades ago, requiring organizations like 4-H to be more creative in how they recruit volunteers, as well as parents (Ladd, 1998). In fact, today's 4-H parents can contribute volunteer time in new and creative ways, such as virtually through the Internet, or to specific activities that involve Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math. Since volunteerism is the lifeblood of many Extension programs, Extension staff need to learn new methods of engaging all types of volunteers (West et al., 2012).

### **Changes in Extension Campus Faculty Expectations and Implications for Stakeholder Engagement**

Extension is influenced by both the demand side (what participants and funders want) and the supply side (what Extension professionals are willing and able to provide). The trends outlined above change the demand side. Extension's supply side has changed over the past 100 years due to three major factors: (1) changes in the role of state specialists in academic departments, (2) changes in scholarship expectations at all levels, and (3) regionalization and specialization of field educators (Morse, 2009).

### **Change in the Role of State Specialists in Academic Departments**

During the 1950s through the 1970s, many states added state specialists who were tenured faculty in academic departments, had joint teaching/research/Extension appointments, and worked as experts throughout the state. Often, their role was the development and testing of a program and then training of field educators to deliver the program throughout the state. Rogers (1995) describes the specialists' role as spanning the differences in the "levels of professionalism, formal education, technical expertise, and specialization" (p. 362) between the campus, field educators, and local audiences. He argued that specialists were the critical link in

helping the university be engaged and successful in outreach and described their spanner role as "... link[ing] the sources of research-based knowledge to the county Extension agents. He or she is the county agent's extension agent" (Rogers, 1995, p. 360).

Rogers (1995) claimed that specialist spanners had typically served as county Extension agents prior to their state specialist role. That was true in the 1950s-60s and is still largely true for youth programming (Culp, McKee & Nestor, 2005), but it is no longer the case for other Extension program areas. For example, the majority of community economics state specialists in academic departments have PhDs and little to no experience as county Extension professionals. In fact, since the mid-1970s, most Extension specialists hired into academic departments have faced the same promotion and tenure expectations as other academic faculty. This requires that they specialize. The result is that the state specialist *spanner* role of connecting county and campus cultures has been greatly diminished in most states (Morse, 2009). However, several states are trying to replace the lost state specialist *spanners* with field specialists, as has happened in community development in Minnesota, Iowa, South Dakota, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, and Ohio (Morse, 2009).

Does this shift to field specialists increase the opportunities for engagement with stakeholders? While research on this question is in its initial stages, there is some indication that it does. Ahmed and Morse (2010) found that the Minnesota educators who moved from a county delivery model to a regional one reported they had more opportunities to learn about their target audiences (62% more), adjust to their target audience needs (56% more), integrate audience feedback (47% more), focus on their program's target audience (69% more), and earn respect from audiences (54% more). All of these signal stronger engagement. Yet, only 39% felt they had closer relationships with their audiences than in the counties, possibly reflecting the change from close neighbors to a more professional relationship (Ahmed & Morse, 2010).

These initial results imply that regionalization and specialization encourage, not discourage, stronger relationships with participants, but much more research is needed on this question.

### **Scholarship Expectations for Extension Educators**

Extension educators are also increasingly expected to be active participants in both the scholarship of teaching and the scholarship of discovery (Boyer, 1990; McGrath, 2006; Morse, 2009; Olson, Skuza, & Blinn, 2007; Vlosky, & Dunn, 2009). While this is partly driven by promotion and tenure expectations, the primary reason is to improve the quality of programs and document their private and public value (Franz, 2009, 2011; Franz et al., 2014; Kalambokidis, 2004).

Clearly, one of the key reasons for low levels of scholarship by Extension staff is that those with the most successful programs often have little time for scholarship. Yet, if good scholarship

leads to stronger programming, this benefits both program participants and all other stakeholders, resulting in stronger attendance and stronger financial support. This implies that strong stakeholder involvement depends on strong evaluation and scholarship.

### **Regionalization and Specialization of Field Staff**

To sustain strong participation in programs and the support of other stakeholders, it will be necessary to develop and deliver strong programs and to articulate both their private and public value. This requires understanding and using the needs assessment, program development, and evaluation methods reviewed in the early chapters in this issue (Franz, Garst, & Gagnon, 2015; Gagnon et al., 2015; Garst & McCawley, 2015).

Yet, Seevers and Graham (2012) point out that “Traditionally, the county has been the center for educational programming efforts...” (p. 47). Is it possible for county-based programming to make these investments? A number of states have decided it is necessary to have greater specialization and regional delivery to make these program investments. States that have adopted both a regional system and field specialists on a broad scale are Minnesota (Morse, 2009), Iowa (Clause, Koundinya, Glenn, & Payne, 2012), South Dakota (SDSU Extension, 2011), New Hampshire (Pike, 2012), and Pennsylvania (Penn State Extension, 2011). Ohio has also adopted this approach for its community development work (Bowen-Ellzey, Romich, Civittolo, & Davis, 2013; Kremer, 2012).

Many of the new field specialists are being hired with M.S. degrees in their field of specialization and have little or no training in adult education, participatory action research, engaged scholarship, needs assessment, program development, and evaluation methods (Morse, 2009). Most state specialists in academic departments also have no formal training in these topics. This implies the need for more intensive in-service training for both groups because stakeholder involvement depends on quality programming.

Considering the changing needs of Extension stakeholders, as well the changing expectations for Extension professionals, the following case studies illustrate how Extension has effectively engaged with diverse stakeholders. The first case illustrates how Extension modified its program delivery model to meet the changing needs of diverse community stakeholders undergoing an Extension-led community visioning process. The second case illustrates how Minnesota Extension’s regional delivery system enabled field staff to engage different stakeholders involved in a business retention and expansion program.

## **New Hampshire's Community Profiles Visioning Program**

The following case study uses a qualitative approach to examine how the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension (UNHCE) adapted its approach to engaging stakeholders in a community visioning program established over twenty-five years ago that continues today.

### **Description of Community Profiles Visioning**

Through the Community Profiles program, UNHCE has helped 71 New Hampshire cities and towns—about one-third of the state's municipalities—to develop a vision for their future and has mobilized local residents to act upon that vision. The Community Profiles process allows community residents to take stock of current conditions, articulate goals for the future, and develop an action plan for achieving that vision (French & Lord-Fonseca, 2008).

The Community Profiles program was conceived by a consortium of organizations in the Northeast in the late 1980s to help communities engage the public in crafting a community vision and succeed in moving them from vision to action. Mobilizing action around a common vision has been a challenge for communities that rely mainly on volunteers.

The program included an intensive, six-month planning process led by a local steering committee to organize the Community Profile, something with which local boards and committees were familiar. The visioning forum itself typically began with a Friday evening potluck dinner and continued through Saturday. It was not unusual to attract 10% of a town's population to the forum, and in some cases, over a quarter of the population. Residents of New Hampshire towns were accustomed to coming together to talk about important issues. The Town Meeting had long been the primary mode of governance in New Hampshire towns where important issues were discussed, town warrant articles were voted upon, and local residents weighed in on matters of local import. This culture helped the Community Profile process take root in nearly one-third of New Hampshire towns, as it aligned with the way New Hampshire communities did business.

However, in 1995, the state Senate passed a bill—dubbed as SB2 for Senate Bill 2—that enabled towns to adopt a process whereby warrant articles are given their final vote by official ballot or referendum. In the subsequent decade, dozens of towns in New Hampshire converted to SB2. Today, close to 70 towns have adopted the ballot process over the Town Meeting. While some lamented the loss of the Town Meeting—the one annual opportunity for people come together with fellow residents to talk about important issues—a wave of towns converted to the ballot.

Not unrelated to the loss of Town Meetings was waning interest in the Community Profiles process post-2000. Communities simply lost the habit of coming together to discuss issues, and it became harder to recruit people to serve on local Community Profile steering committees.

Rather than discontinue the program, UNHCE evaluated what was working and not working for community program participants. The goal of the process is to get people of all ages, abilities, and interests involved and sharing a voice so they can have a say in community matters. However, one issue uncovered through the evaluation was that the older generation in communities was no longer serving on local boards and committees. Yet, the younger generation of adults was not stepping in to take their place. For many young adults, the Community Profile process felt antiquated (French & Lord-Fonseca, 2008). Youth were also not feeling engaged in the program. The process was intimidating and the timing of the program activities conflicted with sports and homework. In fact, parents were limiting their involvement for many of the same reasons.

Thus, Extension was challenged to reimagine the process, with the desired end goal of mobilizing community members to take part in positive, grassroots action. With help from former Community Profile participants and Extension professionals, the process was updated. The following key changes were made to the program to adapt to the times, noting the specific societal trends that drove the changes.

### **Rapidly Evolving Communication Technology**

Given that the way in which people in communities communicate with each other was rapidly changing—particularly for millennial audiences—Extension recognized that Extension professionals, as well as members of the Community Profile steering committee, required training. As a result, Extension professionals committed to learning how to effectively use social media to engage audiences. They, in turn, taught steering committee members how to more effectively use social media to market the Community Profile visioning forum event to new audiences, such as tech-savvy Millennials.

New participant engagement techniques were also incorporated into the process to solicit input, such as gathering feedback from participants who did not attend the forum. Examples include *sticky note flash mobs*, which collect input on how people feel about a particular space using sticky notes posted on a façade, and the *We Table*, which allows people to identify special places on a digital map projected for everyone in the community to see.

### **Changing Demographics**

A major problem facing rural New Hampshire is the out-migration of young people after high school. To address this issue, Extension facilitated steering committee members through a process to identify ways to address the outmigration trend. This led to a separate youth visioning process conducted in cooperation with local schools to occur prior to the Community Profile visioning forum. This separate process, which now utilizes new technologies such as real-time

mapping to enable youth to identify community assets that they care about, garnered youth participation and gave them a chance to present their hopes and dreams to the community to set the stage for the Community Profile public forum. Though no empirical data supports that this process has helped to reverse the outmigration trend, anecdotal evidence from youth participants suggests it would influence their decision to stay in the community (French & Lord-Fonseca, 2008).

### **Increasing Diversity**

Diversity in the context of public engagement means more than just racial and ethnic diversity. It also connotes diversity in socioeconomic class, occupation, age, gender, level of participation in community affairs, and interests. Two decades of experience conducting Community Profiles in over 70 communities led Extension to realize that steering committees were *not* as diverse as they should be. This resulted in a diminished ability to engage diverse segments of the community to help plan and/or participate in the visioning process. To address this concern, Extension implemented a new training segment for steering committee members aimed at helping them identify potential new members not typically engaged in community affairs. They also learned how to reach out to under-represented segments of the community to participate in the process, such as minorities, low-income residents, senior citizens, single mothers, youth, etc.

### **Urbanization**

Although New Hampshire's largest city has fewer than 100,000 residents, the state saw double-digit growth rates per decade from 1950 to 2000. As suburban towns grew in population and development, they faced many of the same challenges as urban communities: overcrowded schools, increased crime, and loss of sense of neighborhood unity. Given Extension's limited success conducting the Community Profiles process in several of the state's larger communities, the program organizers piloted a new, neighborhood-centric approach in the state's largest city, Manchester. Four separate neighborhood forums were held, based on how local residents collectively defined their neighborhood boundaries. This garnered greater local buy-in and provided a sense of local control by decision makers in neighborhood wards. The framing of the process, which had previously focused on the elements of a vibrant community, was adapted to be more reflective of an urban setting. These changes resulted in a greater relative participation by residents in the process than in other urbanized communities.

In summary, the Community Profiles visioning process was modified to adapt to changing trends and community needs. Extension embraced the use of communications technologies to better reach community stakeholders, and it focused more energy on engaging young people, as well as other typically underrepresented audiences. While resources have not allowed the type of evaluations to tell if these strategies have rippled out to have longer-term impacts on the way that

communities engage with local residents, the modifications that were made in the last five years certainly have impacted the diversity of Community Profile steering committee members, as well as participants.

### **Minnesota's Community-Driven Business Retention and Expansion Program**

The previous case study explored how Extension specialists adapted a program to address changing audience needs, considering current trends impacting engagement. The following case study focuses on how the diversity of stakeholders, both those in the community and those who provide additional financial and technical support, are engaged.

The Minnesota Community-Driven Business Retention and Expansion Program (or simply BR&E) helps existing community businesses survive and thrive. The program's short-term goals are to demonstrate to local businesses that the community cares about their success and is willing to help solve local problems, such as navigating local and state regulations and improving local services. The long-term goals of the program are to build leaders' capacity to respond quickly to major economic development opportunities or challenges, help firms become more competitive in a global economy, and help communities to develop and implement strategic plans (Loveridge & Morse, 1997; Morse, 1990; University of Minnesota Extension, 2015).

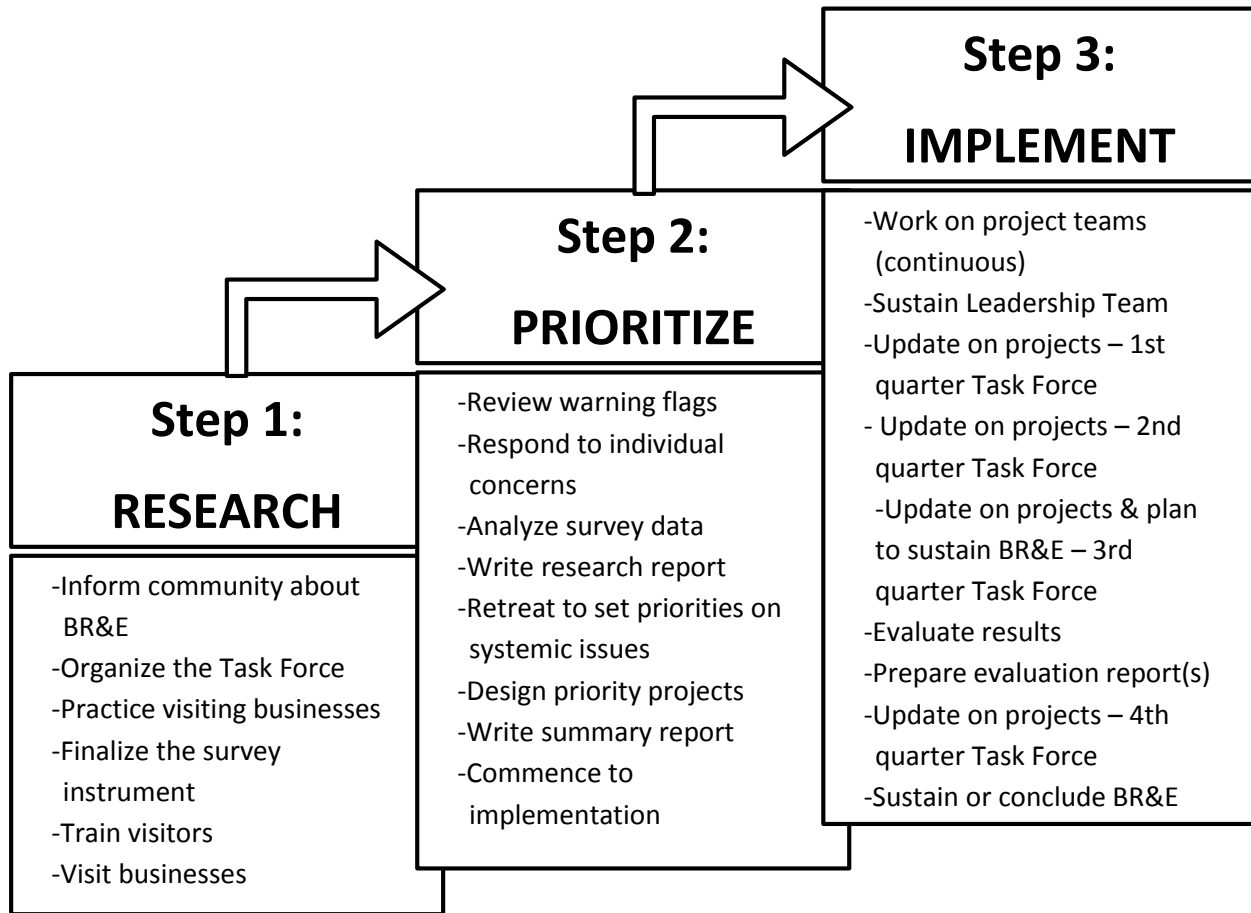
Implementing BR&E is a three-step process: (1) application of research with local firms by local leaders, (2) prioritization of immediate and long-term reactions to the results after review of the data collected of local businesses, and (3) implementation of the plans by local leaders with assistance from state agencies as summarized in Figure 1 (Darger, 2014).

### **Stakeholder Involvement**

Stakeholder involvement in the BR&E program is based on the practices of educational organizing (Peters, 2002) and participatory action research (Greenwood et al., 1993). To explore the stakeholder involvement in the BR&E program, we will describe the experiences from the Menahga, Minnesota, program, which started in 2011 and continues today. Menahga is a city of 1,306 people in predominantly rural, north-central Minnesota.

Before the program starts, it is the community's responsibility to secure funds to implement the program. In Menahga, the Initiatives Foundation provided a grant to help the city cover the university fee for the BR&E program. If Michael Darger, the state specialist, and Adeel Ahmed, the regional educator, specializing in community economics, had not developed connections with the Initiative Fund earlier, this might not have happened.

*Figure 1. Minnesota’s Three-Step BR&E Approach (Darger, 2014)*



**Step 1 – Research to Better Understand Business Needs, Opportunities, and Challenges**

The key participants in the program include local leaders. Having leaders from the business community, local government, public schools, community colleges, and nonprofits is important to the program’s success. Minnesota Extension asks communities to demonstrate that they have a team of these leaders recruited prior to agreeing to work with them. To ensure that the local team understands the program and how it fits their needs, Extension provides a half-day overview for interested communities.

In step one, the Leadership Team in Menahga formed with six local leaders: the Mayor, City Administrator, two City Councilors, and two members of the Civic and Commerce Association. This group recruited 11 other local citizens to participate on a Task Force, including representatives from the city, public schools, and local nonprofit economic development groups. While Ahmed advised the Task Force on types of businesses to visit as part of the program, it was a group decision.



A key practice in the BR&E is for community leaders to participate in surveys of local businesses. The Task Force also recruited 17 *visitors* to help with business visits and surveys. Eight of these 17 people were local business owners. This volunteer-driven effort not only reduces program costs, but also demonstrates to businesses that community leaders care about local businesses. The discussion between business and public sector leaders helps build trust and sets the stage for them to work together on future economic development issues.

Thirty-seven community leaders visited fifty-three firms. A key visitor role was to flag urgent concerns that a particular business had. While this step involved both educational organizing and participatory action research, most local participants simply saw it as an action program.

### **Step 2 – Prioritize the Projects and Actions on Which to Focus**

This step engages program participants in different ways. Ahmed facilitated two meetings of the Task Force to review concerns identified by firms, called *warning flags*. These flags are issues unique to a firm and often require individual attention rather than a community-wide response. In Menahga, no warning flags needing follow-up were found (Ahmed, personal communication, March 2015). A 14-person State Research Review Panel (Menahga Task Force members, Extension specialists, and state agency partners) was convened at the University of Minnesota campus. The panel reviewed the tabulated data, conducted a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis, and suggested action steps for Menahga leaders to consider.

Using the results from the above meeting, Tuck, Darger, and Dorr (2012b) developed the 127-page Research Report for the Menahga Task Force. The Research Report included three broad strategies, outlined the economic concepts behind the strategy, reported survey data, and identified 25 specific actions for implementing the strategies. The Menahga Task Force could choose to adopt all of the strategies and related projects, modify any of the strategies, do nothing, or design entirely new strategies or projects to address issues. Using this report, Ahmed facilitated a Menahga Task Force retreat to review the research report results and select priority projects based on a set of criteria. Five of the 25 action projects were selected by the Task Force and are reported in the 18-page Summary Report (Tuck et al., 2012a).

### **Step 3 – Implement the Plan by Garnering Participation of Local Stakeholders**

Project implementation was often weak in the early programs (Morse & Ha, 1997; Morse & Lazarus, 2000). As a result, Ryan Pesch, regional Extension educator, encouraged the Menahga group to hold four quarterly implementation meetings scheduled and facilitated by Extension. In Menahga, 15 local leaders joined the implementation team and reported on their progress at these quarterly meetings. Not every team reported actions at the first meeting, but the enthusiasm generated by those who took action inspired others to do so.

A number of projects were successfully implemented by the Menahga group. One project, options for new retail and lodging development, resulted in sixteen new senior housing units that opened in 2013 (Pesch, personal communication, April 2015). A second project, community music nights, started in 2013 and has been held for two years during summer months. A third project, business networking through the Civic and Commerce Club, resulted in monthly breakfasts for the past two years. A fourth project, local career fair, was held for high school youth to showcase local employment and training options. The Menahga School Superintendent reported, "During the first year of the fair, 35 businesses participated and 100 students and 50 community members and parents attended. During the second year, 40 businesses and 130 students participated" (Longworth, 2014, para. 12). Only the fifth project dealing with business transitions stalled, as a result of changes in the committee.

The above BR&E processes are consistent with tenants of educational organizing (Peters, 2002) and participatory action research (Greenwood et al., 1993) as outlined in Loveridge and Morse (1997). While both Ahmed and Pesch were Extension educators specializing in community economics and covering large geographic areas (University of Minnesota, 2015), they were able to actively engage the local leaders in this participatory action research using educational organization principles specific to this program. Ahmed and Pesch's campus- and state-level networks allowed them to pull in applied research assistance in an effective and timely fashion. As a result of this two-way engagement, the group is now self-sustaining and still moving ahead.

### **Conclusion**

The context of Extension education is very different today than in 1914 or even in the 1980s. The number and types of stakeholders that Extension organizations work with is ever-expanding and include far more than those directly participating in programs. The external trends influencing who Extension's stakeholders are, as well as how they would like to be engaged around specific topics, include changes in communication technology, rising educational levels, increasing impacts of an integrated global economy on rural economies, growth in ethnic and racial diversity, increased urbanization, and shifts in the ways that people volunteer. Changes at LGUs are also influencing the way that Extension programs are implemented, such as the change in the role of state specialists who are in academic departments, higher scholarship expectations of Extension educators, and regionalization and specialization of Extension field educators.

Each of the above trends impacts Extension's ability to deliver high quality programs, which are essential to strong participation in educational activities and strong public financial support from other stakeholders. To learn about and effectively use the new tools in needs assessment, program development, and program implementation research and evaluation requires considerable investments by Extension. It might also require some fundamental shifts in its

delivery system towards more regionalization and specialization in order to make it feasible for staff and to capture economies of scale.

The two case studies highlighted in this article illustrate how Extension has adapted to the changing context of stakeholder involvement. The New Hampshire Community Profiles Visioning case demonstrates that the way stakeholders want to engage in community development programs has changed over time and that Extension had to be attuned to these changes to sustain participation in the program. The Minnesota Business Retention and Expansion Program case demonstrates how diverse stakeholders, including program nonparticipants, can influence efforts to engage a broader audience. This case also examines how changes on campus impact the role of field staff in a program that requires high levels of community engagement to be successful.

As demonstrated by the case studies, projects were successful when adaptations were made to engage more and diverse stakeholders in the wake of changing societal trends and institutional-organizational structures. Both programs incorporated what is often referred to as *educational organizing*, whereby decisions were made by local leaders rather than by the Extension professionals. This marks a significant transformation from Extension's original role as primarily a disseminator of research-based information. However, both of these programs add research-based concepts and data at appropriate stages for local use, making them a form of participatory action research.

Also key to the success of both programs was the fact that the Extension professionals had a strong reputation and credibility with state and regional leaders in both the private and public sectors. This allowed the Extension professionals to leverage this network to help fund the programs and to serve as resource people. The programs were also led by highly specialized Extension professionals—both state specialists and field/regional specialists—who had particular expertise in community economics. This specialization has been key to ensuring that the programs are research-based, incorporate cutting-edge best practices regarding engagement, and are implemented in a consistent manner from one region to another.

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