

**Overview:**  
**The USDA and Land-Grant University System Partnership  
to Support Cooperative Extension and Life-long Learning**

**What is Cooperative Extension?**

Cooperative Extension was established in 1914 with the passage of the Smith-Lever Act. This legislation authorized cooperative extension work between the state land grant colleges/universities and the USDA in each state. These colleges or universities were to establish extension departments to give instruction and practical demonstrations in agriculture and home economics through field demonstrations, publication, and other methods (Huffman and Evenson 2006b, p. 27). An additional component of Cooperative Extension was to develop programs directed to rural youth development—later named 4-H. Federal funds were authorized and the amounts for Cooperative Extension were to be allocated partly to states on an equal basis and partly on the basis of a state's share of the U.S. rural population, with the latter matched by state funds. This act and related legislation established a unique partnership structure that has sustained the Cooperative Extension System to this day. Today in every state, an institution exists that is part of a nationwide system known as Cooperative Extension—a network of largely off-campus educators who extend research-based knowledge to the public and engage people in life-long learning.

Over time, the partnership evolved into a tripartite funding agreement between federal, state, and local government—represented by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, each state's land-grant university, and local governments (county, parish, etc.). In effect, the Smith-Lever mandate and related funding provisions enabled land-grant universities to link their teaching and research missions with an outreach mission to interpret, disseminate, and promote practical uses of knowledge to improve farmer's, household's, small businesses, and local government's decisions and welfare. Extension is also a channel by which information needs or problems can originate from the ground up and inform the agricultural research agenda of scientist at land grand universities (Huffman and Evenson 2006b, p. 50-52).

The Cooperative Extension system consists of university, regional or area level and county personnel. Hence, this system links together the 3,000 plus U.S. counties to the land grant universities, and local clientele can draw upon individuals who have a range of scientific expertise in a broad range of areas. Furthermore, the integration of teaching, research, and extension education enables Cooperative Extension to employ research-based information and education programs to meet the needs of local clientele who are at various stages in their lifecycle of existence. Extension strives to produce local public goods information.

**Smith-Lever Act: Issuing the Mandate**

While the authors of the enabling legislation for Cooperative Extension could not foresee the future, the mandates implicit within the legislation are as applicable today as in 1914:

**Serve Agriculture and the Public.** The Smith-Lever Act gave Extension a very broad clientele base—"the people of the United States"—yet also specified that its programs should be concerned with "agriculture and home economics and subjects relating thereto."

**Define Agriculture Broadly.** The term “agriculture” was used in a comprehensive sense in the Smith-Lever Act and subsequent legislation to include producing, processing, and marketing farm and forest products, plus those businesses and industries concerned with supplying the resources needed in the production and marketing process. For example, the report by Mr. Lever of the House Committee on December 8, 1913 stated:

*“To teach the farmer the best methods of increasing production is exceedingly important, but not more vitally so than is the importance of teaching him the best and most economical methods of distribution. It is not enough to teach him how to grow bigger crops. He must be taught how to get the true value for these bigger crops . . . . (The Extension agent) will be expected to give as much thought to the economic side of agriculture—the marketing, standardizing, and grading of farm products—as he gives to the matter of larger acreage yields.”*

**Enhance Human Development.** In the same report, Representative Lever further defined the role of the Extension agent: *“He is to assume leadership in every movement, whatever it may be, the aim of which is better farming, better living, more happiness, more education, and better citizenship.”* In the agrarian society of the time, this broad and significant leadership challenge was applied first to teaching home economics or home management to farm women, and to programs aimed at youth. The underlying mandate is to provide educational programs for individuals and families that will enhance human development and maximize the individual’s contribution to society.

**Meet Local Problems.** Section 8 of the Smith-Lever Act establishes the obligation of Extension to provide *“. . . Assistance and counseling to local groups in appraising resources for capability of improvements in agriculture or introduction of industry designed to supplement farm income; . . . cooperation with other agencies and groups in furnishing all possible information as to existing employment opportunities, particularly to farm families . . . .”* This section establishes the need for additional assistance in areas faced with special or unusual hardships, and acknowledges Extension’s role in working with groups as well as individuals in meeting local problems.

### **Funding by Federal, State, and Local Government Partners**

Cooperative Extension is currently financed for a total of \$1.8 billion, of which 21.2 percent is federal money and 71.2 percent is state and local funds. Of the federal portion, formula funds comprise 78.6 percent for “1862 institutions” (per Morrill Act of 1862). With the state and county funds representing a large majority of the funding, state and county control of extension activities has been the dominate mode of operation. One could suggest that a small amount of federal funds has been leveraged into a much larger amount of state and county funding for Cooperative Extension. This most likely would not occur if the Extension were centrally controlled from Washington.

Currently, federal funds for Cooperative Extension are distributed to the states on several different bases. Some funds are distributed equally among states; some are distributed on the basis of a state’s share of the farm population, or the basis of a state’s share of total population. Although local financial support was not required by the federal legislation, it evolved as local people began to support the program and see it as their own. Local funding is a substantial portion of total Extension funding in most states.

Extension across the nation is accountable to stakeholders at multiple levels. At the local level, stakeholders include farmers, households, small businesses, and local governments. At the state level, stakeholders include the state legislatures, various state agencies, and state organizations of farm, commodity, and business organizations. The federal stakeholders include CSREES, USDA, and other federal agencies, and national organizations of commodity, farm, environmental and consumer groups. At the local and state level each state may be required to submit evidence of impact in different ways. Currently CSREES mandates that stakeholder input be incorporated into plans of work and that periodically each state must submit plans of work and annual progress reports to show accountability.

One of the greatest strengths in Cooperative Extension is relevant response to clientele issues and problems. To do this effectively, needs assessment and program development process is employed to ensure that specific program objectives are set forth and met. Program development is a dynamic process that involves people within a community to guide the extension educator in developing educational strategies to address local issues. These issues range across agriculture, natural resources, community development, family and consumer science, and youth development.

Cooperative Extension utilizes numerous sources of continuous stakeholder input to identify relevant issues and response actions. These sources include commodity or special interest groups, county and other local committees, elected officials, state and national trends or mandates, base programming, and issues identified by extension specialists. In addition, most Cooperative Extension agencies employ strategically designed listening sessions as part of long-range planning every four to five years, which guides major resource development and staffing decisions.

At the same time, county-level program offerings are constantly being directed to relevant local issues through real-time involvement of community members on volunteer program committees. People nationwide can look to Cooperative Extension for broad expertise, experience, and a diverse array of program models that have countless applications to serve people wherever they live, especially to address issues pertaining to food and fiber systems, environment and natural resources, family and consumer sciences, youth development, and community economic development.

## **Cooperative Extension Programming and Impacts**

Extension originated from two distinct roots. In the South, the USDA developed an effective local extension program in early 20<sup>th</sup> century to fight the cotton boll weevil. A successful control program was built on field demonstrations and improved farm management practices. In the North and West, extension grew out of an effort by land grant colleges to improve the quality of farm management decisions of farmers through the use of farm record keeping and comparisons (Huffman and Evenson 2006b, p. 26-27). Under the Smith-Lever Act, these two different approaches to Extension were combined into one coordinated program. It was linked to the federal government in three ways:

- 1) state acceptance of the Smith-Lever Act,
- 2) the requirement that states match federal money to support the program, and
- 3) by the Memorandum of Understanding between the Secretary of Agriculture and the land-grant universities chosen by state legislatures to serve as the parent institution for program administration.

Major national goals for Cooperative Extension are established at the federal level through the USDA Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service and with input from the states and citizen groups. These broad national objectives allow for wide latitude in responding to diverse and changing needs in each state. County extension staff initiated programs are based on local needs within the parameters set at the state level. While local “grassroots” extension clientele exert a continuous pressure toward practicality and usability of extension programming, the state and national bases provide the knowledge and information to deal with broader problems and goals.

Cooperative Extension has a distinguished history of providing important and timely information for some of the nation’s most important problems of farmers, households, small businesses, and communities. Some important impacts include:

- World War I – Extension mobilized war food production efforts and stressed food production, preservation, and clothing conservation projects among adults and 4-H youth.
- 1920s – A farm depression changed emphasis from production to economic concerns, farm efficiency and the quality of rural life. Unable to hire professionals, extension called upon volunteers which stimulated rural leadership development. Extension helped farmers organize cooperatives, many of which continue to operate today.
- Great Depression – Extension was called upon to manage the Farm Seed and Loan Program; home economics programs helped families with self-sufficiency and stretching resources.
- New Deal Era – Extension became involved in the management of federal programs such as the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, Soil Conservation Service, and Farmers Home Administration.
- 1950s and 60s – Extension promoted a revolution in agricultural production, showing farmers how to combine new technology and better farm management practices for vastly greater productivity which built the nation’s powerhouse agricultural economy.
- 1960s – Extension initiated the federally-funded Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) to improve the nutrition and health of low-income families living in the inner cities. The program is deemed among the most successful of the “Great Society” era.
- 1970s and 80s – Extension worked with farmers to introduce strategies for sustainable agriculture and use Integrated Pest Management to minimize use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers; Extension also worked extensively with families to develop financial plans for surviving the 1980s farm crisis.
- 1990s – Extension initiatives to improve water supply and quality, and to enhance water and air quality, became even more important as rapidly urbanizing areas expanded into formerly rural lands.

- 2000s – Extension is addressing contemporary issues such as agro-terrorism and homeland security, energy and the bio-based economy, preventing childhood obesity, and diet and health issues.<sup>1</sup>

Also, Huffman and Evenson (2006a) have shown that agricultural and resource extension has had a statistically significant positive impact on state agricultural productivity over 1970-2000. Furthermore, the marginal social benefit of this information is much larger than its marginal social cost. Hence, even with rapidly changing channels of information and information technologies, Cooperative Extension continues to provide an important service.<sup>2</sup>

### **Moving Forward with a Timeless Mission**

Recent interpretations further illuminate the Extension mission. According to McDowell (2001, p. 69), the purpose of Cooperative Extension has always been:

“(1.) To seek to know the problems of ordinary people and bring those problems to the attention of the researchers, (2.) To deliver functional education, based on the best scholarship available, to ordinary people, and to help solve their problems, and (3.) To collect political support from the beneficiaries of Extension programs in order to fund the continued research and education of ordinary people of the society....”

Rasmussen (1989, p. 1) stated that, “The mission of the Cooperative Extension Service is to help people improve their lives through an educational process which uses scientific knowledge focused on issues and needs.”

“Extension education is an intentional effort to fulfill predetermined and important needs of people and communities,” (Seevers, Graham, Gamon, & Conklin, 1997, p. 91).

### **Changing the Formula Funding Mechanism**

A removal of federal formula funding of Cooperative Extension would break the partnership that was established in 1914. The success of Extension also depends on local support and hard work by extension faculty and volunteers. At the center of this support is a long tradition of financial backing by the federal government. The synergistic effect of this partnership has allowed groups to work together and has sustained efforts to help communities solve critical issues, while reducing unneeded competition.

If Extension were to become funded by external grants and contracts, extension efforts to support the common good would largely disappear. Public goods extension would not be undertaken because there would be no individual or group that would fund it. Over time, social welfare would be reduced.

### **References:**

---

<sup>1</sup> Highlights of specific program successes are available in a “Science and Education Impacts” database online at URL. <http://www.csrees.usda.gov/newsroom/impacts/impacts.html>.

<sup>2</sup> For a more extensive summary of the returns to agricultural extension activities, see Evenson 2001.

Evenson, R.E. "Economic Impacts of Agricultural Research and Extension." In B.L Gardner and G. Rausser, Eds., *Handbook of Agricultural Economics, Vol. 1A*. New York, NY: North-Holland, 2001.

Gupta, K. (1999). *A practical guide to needs assessment*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Pfeiffer Publishers.

Huffman, W.E. and R.E. Evenson. "Do Formula or Competitive Grant Funds have Greater Impacts on State Agricultural Productivity." *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 2006a forthcoming.

Huffman, W.E. and R.E. Evenson. *Science for Agriculture: A Long-Term Perspective*. Ames, IA: Blackwell Publ. 2006b.

McDowell, G. R. (2001). *Land-grant universities and extension into the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Ames: Iowa State University Press.

National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, *Development of the Land-Grant System: 1862-1994*, retrieved from <http://www.nasulgc.org> on September 5, 2005.

Pennsylvania State University College of Agricultural Sciences, Brief Historical Perspective of Cooperative Extension, retrieved from <http://www.cas.psu.edu/> on September 5, 2005.

Rasmussen, W. D. (1989). *Taking the University to the People: 75 Years of Cooperative Extension*, Iowa State University Press.

Report of the Joint USDA-NASULGC Study Committee on Cooperative Extension, *A People and a Spirit*, Colorado State University, Nov., 1968.

Seevers, B. S., Graham, D., Gamon, J. & Conklin, N. (1997). *Education through cooperative extension*. Albany, NY: Delmar Publishers.