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EXTENDING LIFELONG LEARNING

Cooperative Extension Services and the 21st Century Land-Grant Mission

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Ohio State University professor Stephen M. Gavazzi and West Virginia University president E. Gordon Gee recently co-authored "Land-Grant Universities for the Future: Higher Education for the Public Good." The book, published in November 2018 by Johns Hopkins University Press, is based largely on interviews they had conducted with 27 presidents and chancellors of land-grant universities, some of the largest and best universities in America.

Land-grant universities were established by the Morrill Act in 1862 and part of their mission is to make the knowledge of the university accessible to their communities. This critical work is championed by Cooperative Extension divisions, who offer an array of services designed to educate and inform citizens across their respective states.

These authors sat down with colleagues from their respective universities—Roger Rennekamp at Ohio State and Steve Bonanno at West Virginia—to discuss the evolving impact of cooperative extension services on the 21st-century mission of our nation's public land-grant universities.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): Why has the focus on Cooperative Extension Services grown so much in recent years?

Gordon Gee (GG): In *Land-Grant Universities for the Future*, we discuss how the intensified focus on cooperative extension services goes hand in hand with the country's growing interest in outreach and engagement activities. The birth of extension occurred with the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, the congressional action that put all of this into motion over 100 years ago. Since that time, extension personnel have been the natural go-to partners for university faculty, staff and students who wished to become more connected to the communities we were designed to serve.

Steve Bonanno (SB): Communities have greater expectations of land-grant universities beyond just educating our students. Viewed as a tremendous resource, many communities want an engaged university to help address local as well as

global issues. Often serving as the “front door,” extension serves as the portal for communities to initiate engagement and collaboration with the academic enterprise. Faculty also are beginning to realize extension’s ability to enhance the student experience, bring relevancy to applied research and connect faculty to communities that enrich their academic work.

Roger Rennekamp (RR): At a time when many Americans are feeling disconnected from the largely intellectual pursuits of colleges and universities, efforts by academic institutions to re-engage with communities are logical and predictable. For many land-grant universities, it is a matter of demonstrating relevance. A cynic might suggest that such a renewed focus on community engagement is not genuine, but a last gasp effort to ensure their survival. Alternatively we can hope that such efforts are genuine and a sign that a new generation of faculty, staff and students are resurrecting the commitment to education for the common good.

Evo: How could Cooperative Extension Services evolve to continue to execute on their mission of expanding access to university knowledge for a 21st-century audience?

Stephen Gavazzi (SG): The evolving nature of Cooperative Extension Services is tied to the demographic shifts from rural to urban populations in this country. In the 1860s, when land-grant universities were first created, the population of the United States was 80 percent rural, and 20 percent urban. We have exactly the opposite situation now. Over 80 percent of our nation’s population resides in more urban areas. The land-grant university leaders we interviewed for the “Land-Grant Universities for the Future” book

were keen to point to this geographical fact, and they expressed a great deal of concern about the continued need for extension personnel to become more adept at meeting the needs of our increasingly urbanized population.

Universities that are not engaged with their communities in the 21st century will soon find themselves disengaged from any meaningful relevance to the citizens of the United States.

RR: One hundred years ago, less than 10 percent of the population possessed even a high school diploma. A county extension agent could come into a community with a college degree and be revered as someone with deep expertise and broad knowledge of the ways of the world. Their lectures and demonstrations would be well attended and leave audiences spellbound. As issues become increasingly complex, the role of the extension agent must change from technical expert to convener and connector. The next-century extension agent must possess skills in collaborative problem solving and design thinking. They must also be able to reach back into the university to obtain whatever technical expertise is needed by the community to address the issues it is facing.

SB: Despite the advances in technology that provide access to vast amounts of information, Extension remains relevant by being a trusted source that is responsive to citizens and their communities. Extension may not always

have the technical expertise but rather will be an interface and perhaps bring more of an interpretive role to important research findings. The key will be to continue developing collaborative dialogues between the communities and the campus that hopefully will result in some measure of the pursuit of applied research.

Evo: What is the process for research and university knowledge to progress from the main campus faculty to Cooperative Extension Services?

GG: The classic model developed by the land-grant universities in response to the Smith-Lever Act was to establish an extension office in each of the counties within a given state. Extension agents assigned to each of those offices were tasked with providing educational resources to the citizens of that county that were based on the latest research findings generated by faculty members. Due to financial concerns, some of these county offices have become more regionalized in certain states. More recently, we have witnessed the development of eXtension, an internet-based educational platform that augments the work of county agents by providing 24/7/365 access to those cutting-edge educational resources. Through these and other ways, Cooperative Extension Services must continue to serve as the front door of the engaged university.

SB: We hold symposia to engage campus-based researchers with extension faculty to review campus research and community needs. This often results in collaborative field-based studies. We also assist college capstone courses in field-based projects that enhance the student experience. Extension also can provide leadership campus centers that engage communities in faculty research and

applied solutions.

RR: The critical link here is the people who can interpret, translate, and synthesize the products of a scientific process in ways that lead to evidence-informed practice at the local level. It is the integration of university-based information and local knowledge that typically results in the best solution to a problem.

Evo: How could main campus leaders reorient the university to more thoughtfully and consciously connect traditional faculty with Cooperative Extension Services?

SG: I'm not certain that the reorientation should be focused solely on those faculty members who traditionally have been connected to extension. The university leaders we interviewed for our book clearly were not concerned about faculty members in the agricultural disciplines or in family and consumer sciences. Instead, these presidents and chancellors were apprehensive about those scholars from other parts of the campus who have not been connected to extension historically. What these presidents and chancellors wished to see were greater numbers of professors from the arts, the humanities, the social sciences and medicine becoming more involved with communities through partnerships with extension personnel.

RR: In Ohio, the annual Community Engagement Conference on The Ohio State University campus brings county-based extension practitioners together with faculty from all across campus. Each year, the conference focuses on a different theme that engages a different segment of the campus community. Leaders of college-based extension services must be incentivized to make investments in

colleges other than their own.

SB: We have been employing more joint faculty positions with campus colleges. These positions, embedded in the college, help raise awareness of outreach and engagement opportunities for on-campus faculty. We've seen an increase in collaborative research and outreach programs as a result. Extension and campus leaders need to be the champions for valuing outreach and engagement in the promotion and tenure process.

Evo: Why would a closer connection between the university and Cooperative Extension Services be beneficial for the institution and for the communities they serve?

GG: Peter Magrath, one of the pioneers of the university engagement movement in the last century, said it best in the forward he wrote for *Land-Grant Universities for the Future*. He started off by saying that those universities that are not engaged with their communities in the 21st century will soon find themselves disengaged from any meaningful relevance to the citizens of the United States. I believe that wholeheartedly, and I believe that Cooperative Extension Services must be among the leading partners in these engagement efforts. And increasingly, this is going to necessitate involvement in community and economic engagement activities designed to lift up the many and varied communities of each state. By the way, this question points out one of the key challenges we are facing right now. Cooperative Extension Services, like so many other parts of the university, must not exist as a silo within the university's structure. Traditionally, they have been housed inside of agricultural colleges. Perhaps by placing Cooperative Extension Services under the mantle

of Academic Affairs we can accelerate the university-wide connections we are seeking to facilitate.

SB: I totally agree with President Gee. WVU Extension is uniquely positioned as an independent academic unit with tenure-track faculty specialists and county agents. We have joint research, programs and/or faculty appointments with nearly all colleges. Besides the obvious student recruitment potential, extension provides tremendous opportunities to enrich the undergraduate and graduate student experience, inform the research agenda and provide a portal for bilateral community engagement. Extension provides services that are often beyond the reach for many rural communities.

RR: I agree fully with President Gee as well. I would also say that a closer connection results in increased experiential learning opportunities for students, more relevant research and a broader expanse of knowledge available to communities in their efforts to solve problems and help residents thrive.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Cooperative Extensions support the relevance of land-grant institutions and play a critical role in supporting public access to the university.

As communities evolve and populations shift, Cooperative Extensions must also evolve to ensure they continue to serve their communities and address their needs.

It's essential to get the entire university involved with supporting and expanding the reach of Cooperative Extension. It's not the responsibility of the few for the few, but the responsibility of the many for the many.