Urban Extension–Reflections on the Past–A Look to the Future

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The Cooperative Extension Service (Extension) has built an outstanding reputation by serving clientele in rural areas. The organization's credibility in the past has rested solidly on those stakeholders who have advocated for Extension's continued existence due to its success in helping rural communities move beyond societal ills. With the rapid expansion of urban America, Extension's potential for growth is tremendous—if the organization can adapt to meet the needs of metropolitan communities. This article features highlights of the successes and barriers presented by previous studies and makes suggestions on what can be done to move the urban Extension agenda forward. The authors share results of a case study in Kentucky in hopes of offering current and future recommendations for the many Extension systems across the country challenged with being as relevant a resource to urban areas as the organization is to its rural counterparts.

Keywords: municipal, metropolitan, history, challenges, barriers, solutions

Introduction

A diverse group of Extension leadership from across the country has inspired renewed commitment and the repositioning of the organization's ability to address urban issues. While the need for relevant applied research and application to issues affecting urban population centers across the United States continues to exist, successful policy initiatives and addressing urban challenges on a practical level are expanding. For example, the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) recognized and approved National Extension Urban Leaders (NUEL) as a "voluntary, regionally representative, and Director/Administrator-approved group of Extension employees who cooperate in advancing the strategic importance and long-term value of urban Extension activities by being relevant locally, responsive statewide, and recognized nationally" (Willis, 2015, p. 1). ECOP also accepted the document, *A National Framework for Urban Extension: A Report from the National Urban Extension Leaders*, that explains national trends and the opportunities Extension has to positively impact local communities (ECOP, 2015; NUEL, 2015). As further support for urban Extension efforts, two NUEL liaisons were appointed from ECOP and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). Numerous other local and regional successes have been recognized at biannual National

Urban Extension Conferences, forums, task force meetings, and evaluations. This article highlights one particular effort administered intentionally to gather information on the current status of Extension's goals and purpose in urban communities.

Voices from the Past: A Brief Review of the Literature

Acknowledgement of the challenges that exist for Extension educators in addressing the issues faced among urban population centers dates back to the 1960s. Brown (1965) compared and contrasted characteristics of urban and rural communities, noting that, instead of focusing on traditional agricultural production efficiencies, Extension could effectively serve urban communities by

- disseminating agricultural information;
- teaching home economics knowledge and skills;
- assisting in community development by helping people become more involved in making decisions about community improvement;
- consulting various government bodies and agencies; and
- developing an urban youth program, either by organizing clubs or by providing services to other youth-serving groups.

Through a survey of state Extension state administrators, Paulson (1973) found 98% of survey participants fully or partially validated the effectiveness of the "Extension Model" and methodology in addressing urban issues. Paulson also identified existing barriers that limit Extension's ability to most effectively impact these issues. Those barriers are

- agents/educators are not trained to address urban issues,
- Extension seems unwillingness to adapt organizationally to meet urban needs,
- adjustments to Extension's delivery system are needed to reach urban audiences,
- the research base for building urban models is very fragmented,
- the populations of urban communities are increasingly heterogeneous,
- Extension's public image is largely that of exclusively serving agriculture, and
- the sheer volume of the urban audience can overwhelm traditional delivery methods.

An examination of urban communities and the previously noted seven points draws a dramatic contrast to the rural communities where Extension has demonstrated its ability to successfully address needs and issues.

Young and Vavrina (2014) conducted a review of past urban studies and initiatives. They reported that Miller (1973) expressed skepticism regarding the appropriateness of traditional Extension for urban communities. Miller noted two recurring questions: (1) how can the

resources of Land-Grant Universities be used to address broader social issues and (2) why cannot Extension's rural success be transfused into urban America (Miller, 1973).

Yep (1980) credited Extension's historic success with the implementation of the ECOP Extension Program Development Framework. This framework, which has been the basis of effective education programming, includes

- development of institutional framework,
- development of the organizational base,
- determining the Extension program,
- development of annual plan of work,
- program implementation, and
- program evaluation.

This framework of Extension success "appears to be significantly affected by historical, technological, economic, and environmental factors" (Yep, 1980, p. 19). Historically, because the Cooperative Extension Service (Extension) was known as the Agricultural Extension Service for many years, awareness by urban citizens was low, highlighting the need for effective marketing.

Yep (1980) also acknowledged the general lack of an urban research knowledge base similar to the reservoir of knowledge to which Extension educators have had access through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Land-Grant Universities, and Experiment Stations. Another barrier relates to the lack of adequate financial resources in many urban communities. These economic challenges hurt Extension by limiting access to local matching funds. Another challenge to Extension's success relates to the complexity of the environment in urban communities where populations are more condensed and diverse (Yep, 1980). These larger and more complex populations magnify the social challenges often present.

Contrary to rural communities where Extension is one of only a few organizations available to address community priorities, urban communities might compete with many organizations for scarce resources. The existence of multiple power structures within a single county is indeed an obstacle that contrasts with traditional rural communities that have fewer potential competitors.

In April 1991, Texas Extension implemented an "Urban Initiative" for its largest counties. This initiative focused on "development of urban faculty, involving urban lay leaders in program development and education programs for urban audiences" (Fehlis, 1992, p. 1) and is similar to the metro model described by Miller (1973). Young and Vavrina (2014) noted the work of Franz and Cox (2012) involving "disruptive innovation." Disruptive innovation, as defined by the authors is used as a means to "exploring, implementing, or evaluating organizational innovations

and to enhance relevance and sustainability" (Franz & Cox, 2012, p. 1). The authors point out that decreases in traditional funding, office closures, and the need for alternative methods to communicate program impact have led to "disruptive" but innovative solutions.

In 2013, Kentucky Extension hosted an Urban Extension Forum. The purpose of the forum was to explore the "structural barriers and solutions that would allow Extension to more successfully function in urban communities" (Young & Vavrina, 2014, p. 4). The forum was attended by nearly 70 Extension professionals representing both of Kentucky's Land-Grant institutions (The University of Kentucky and Kentucky State University). Attendees were asked to provide "barrier and solution" feedback on five topic areas:

- adequate financial resources in urban communities,
- local priorities in urban communities,
- high levels of teamwork in urban communities,
- strong communication and interaction with urban government leaders, and
- visionary and creative leadership in urban communities.

A summary of all feedback was conducted at the conclusion of the forum, and the following top 10 recurring discussion themes were identified (see Table 1).

Table 1. 2013 Kentucky Urban Extension Forum Discussion Themes

Feedback Themes	f
Media Relations/Marketing	28
Communicating/Interacting with Local Government	19
Specialist Development of Urban Curriculum	18
Strengthening Advisory Councils	17
Structural Issues	16
Partnership	10
Cultural Awareness	9
Limited Resources	9
Work Life Issues	6
Work Location	5

Note: f refers to the frequency with which each theme was identified

Following completion of the Urban Extension Forum, a smaller group of agents, specialists, and administrators continued to meet and discuss the feedback received. This group, later labeled the "Urban Action Team," made the several recommendations to strengthen "urban Extension" in Kentucky and perhaps have application in other states as reported in Young and Vavrina (2014):

- County facilitators and directors are needed in Kentucky's largest counties (not a common practice in 2013).

- All "nonurban" counties would benefit by having a designated agent "primarily" responsible for educating, communicating, and building relationships with local, state, and federal elected officials.
- Key skill sets (meeting facilitation, community networking, collaboration, etc.) should be addressed early in the Extension agent's professional career through professional development.
- Agent responsibilities to supervise support staff and collaborate with elected officials should be clearly communicated in position descriptions.
- The Extension Advisory Council System should be examined in regard to its effectiveness in an ever changing world.
- A unified, consistent marketing message and theme should be developed. This would include tag lines and an updated online "look" for all counties.
- Campus specialists and researchers must become more familiar with the issues and challenges of urban communities.
- Opportunities should be planned in which specialists and agents purposefully collaborate to develop education to address urban issues and challenges.

Case Study: University of Kentucky Extension Service

In the fall of 2016, a follow-up evaluation of the 2013 Kentucky Urban Extension Forum was conducted to assess the experiences of Extension professionals working in urbanized Kentucky counties. These counties were targeted due to the significant growth in population and the rise of issues that are pertinent to urban communities. The state has made attempts to be proactive in meeting these needs while also aiming to communicate the public value of Extension to local- and state-level stakeholders. Given shifts in the political climate at the state level and knowing many urban lawmakers might not be aware of the Extension mission, it was imperative to identify barriers to urban Extension programming as well as solutions that can enhance programming.

An electronic survey was administered to determine if there were any major changes in experiences. A total of 56 Extension agents from 17 counties completed the electronic survey. Nearly 65% (36 total) of the respondents had more than 10 years of experience in Extension, followed by those with 5-10 years of experience (20%), 1-4 years (11%), and less than one year (4%). The large majority of the agents (69%, 39 total) had not worked in an urban county prior to working in Extension.

The county agents responded to questions on the survey that asked them to select, from a list, those barriers which can affect the progress of Extension programming in urban communities. Respondents were asked to "check all that apply." Those barriers are listed in Table 2, along with the frequency of responses.

Table 2. Barriers that Affect the Progress of Extension Programming in Urban Counties

Barriers	%	*f*
Prioritizing Local Programs	64%	35
Developing Visionary Leadership	52%	28
Financial Resources	43%	23
Communicating/Interacting with Local Government	28%	15
Teamwork	26%	14
Other	26%	14

Note: Percent of respondents is based on all individuals completing the survey; *f* refers to the frequency with which each barrier was identified.

In reference to barriers, the Extension professionals were able to select one or more of the five listed on the survey. A total of 35 (64%) noted that "prioritizing local programs" was an issue in urban counties. The second most frequent response was "developing visionary leadership" within the county, with 52% ($n = 28$) selecting this as a key barrier. This pertains to the leadership within Extension, albeit at the state/university or local level. Ranking third was "financial resources" as a barrier. These were followed by "communicating/interacting with local government" and "teamwork."

Respondents were also given an option to list "other" barriers that might exist. Among those mentioned included lack of effective marketing, need for higher visibility of Extension programs, intentional ways of rewarding top performance of Extension work in urban areas, wasted resources, poor conflict resolution (among larger staff/offices), and competition (i.e., Extension program being one choice among many).

When asked about solutions that can aid Extension in serving urban audiences (see Table 3), 73% ($n = 40$) of the respondents indicated that developing visionary leadership was a key factor, and 65% ($n = 36$) reported "teamwork" as being critical to Extension efforts. A close third was "financial resources," followed by "prioritizing local programs" and "communicating/interacting with local government."

***Table 3. Solutions to Aid Extension's Efforts in Urban Counties***

Solutions	%	*f*
Developing Visionary Leadership	73%	40
Teamwork	65%	36
Financial Resources	64%	35
Prioritizing Local Programs	60%	33
Communicating/Interacting with Local Government	56%	31
Other	16%	9

Note: Percent of respondents is based on all individuals completing the survey; *f* refers to the frequency with which each barrier was identified.

Agents offered "other" options that could serve as solutions. Several suggestions included marketing, visibility of Extension programs, having an expert (specialist) to specifically address urban programming, and use of technology to deliver programming (e.g., webinars).

Extension professionals who participated in the evaluation represented all program areas within the Kentucky Extension system. The evaluation did not conduct a comparative analysis across program areas (i.e., 4-H youth development, Agriculture and Natural Resources, Community & Economic Development, Family & Consumer Sciences). Agents were asked to identify topical areas that they perceived were of most interest to their clientele. Respondents selected from a list those topics that were identified as priorities during the 2013 assessment. Figure 1 provides the topics and the percentage of those indicating relevance to clientele (respondents were allowed to check only one topic/area). It is important to note that approximately 16% wrote in "other" topics of importance, including environment education for students, adults, cities, and businesses; wellness; city residents interested in "urban farming;" and beef cattle.

Figure 1. Topic Areas of Most Interest to Urban Clientele as Perceived by Kentucky County Agents
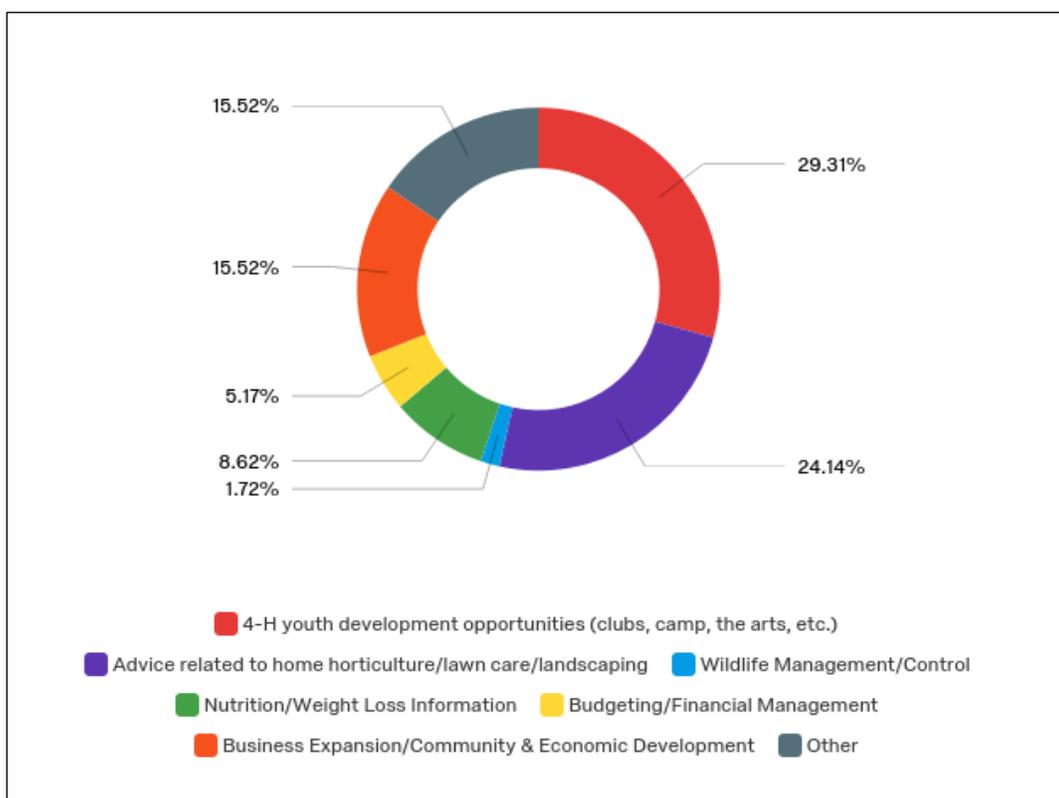
The evaluation also gathered feedback from agents about their perceptions of working as an Extension professional within an urbanized county. Several survey items have been compiled under six constructed themes: addressing local priorities, media relations and marketing,

interaction with elected officials and urban government, financial resources, teamwork and partnerships, and advisory councils.

Addressing local priorities involved Extension having specific goals in place to address urban issues. Media relations/marketing targeted the connections and support that local media affords Extension. Interactions with elected officials focused on whether there is a positive relationship between Extension and city government and whether elected officials are knowledgeable about Extension. Adequate financial resources allowed respondents to report whether they believed urban counties have access to ample funding and if Extension administration is aware of urban financial needs. Teamwork and partnerships focused on whether Extension has strong connections with other organizations, agencies, and underrepresented groups in urban counties. Lastly, advisory council items aimed to assess whether councils are aware of the needs of urban communities and if they represent the diversity within counties. Table 4 reveals respondents' perceptions. Mean scores reflect that most respondents were neutral towards the themes.

Table 4. Extension Professionals' Perceptions of Themes that Affect Efforts in Urban Areas

Themes	Mean	SD
Addressing Local Priorities	3.36	.67
Media Relations/Marketing	3.40	1.00
Interaction with Elected Officials/Urban Government	3.87	.78
Financial Resources	3.03	.86
Teamwork/Partnerships	3.46	.77
Advisory Councils	3.13	.96

Note: Mean is based on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Respondents were also asked to provide feedback on their skills in working within an urban county. Table 5 includes the individual items and the mean scores. The scores reveal that respondents were in agreement with most statements as related to their personal skill levels.

Table 5. Perceptions Toward Personal Skills as an Urban Extension Professional

Skills	Mean	SD
I am comfortable working in an urban county.	4.16	.80
I can identify resources for my county program.	4.09	.69
I have strengths that will help Extension accomplish our goals for urban audiences.	4.25	.61
I have access to training that helps me as an agent in an urban county.	3.45	1.04
I see working in an urban county as a major challenge.	3.29	1.20
I see working in an urban county as a major opportunity.	4.14	.64
I feel as if I am making a difference in my county.	4.21	.70
I believe people in my county value Extension as a local resource.	3.89	.96
I believe the people in my county take advantage of what Extension offers.	3.50	.99

Note: Mean is based on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Current Implications

As we reflect on past scholarship and the theme of urban Extension, similar challenges have been identified and similar solutions proposed. This evaluation revealed that in comparison, Extension professionals continue to recognize similar barriers and solutions to working in urban settings. Being able to prioritize programming pertinent to issues that matter to urban residents is critical to Extension being a key player. Developing visionary leadership is also an important solution but can be a barrier that limits Extension's potential. It is no surprise that financial resources can aid in the thriving of program impact, while limited funding can deter opportunities. Teamwork among staff and partners was another solution valued by Extension professionals. While these barriers and solutions were noted more so by respondents, this does not minimize the other topics that clearly have an impact on Extension's reach in urban areas.

When providing insight on the themes that are factors influencing Extension's efforts, most respondents had average to mediocre perceptions. When considering the way Extension addresses local priorities, it was apparent the organization could be more effective in meeting the unique needs of those in urban areas. Although agents were more positive toward "interactions with elected officials," "media relations" was perceived as less positive. Funding is obviously critical—enabling counties to serve populations adequately through the necessary programs. Internally, teamwork and advisory councils were not perceived highly, which could imply a lack in synergy that could negate efforts to help propel programming to new levels.

One agent cannot solve all of the problems in a large urban county. In order to achieve satisfactory results, the entire Extension office should be of one accord and strive toward a common goal to make an impact. Similarly, advisory councils are a crucial part of Extension's efforts and should not only have diverse backgrounds but also represent the cultural milieu of the county through diverse perspectives and ideas for programs that make a difference. Councils and volunteers, in general, are the heart of grassroots efforts and should be looked upon to help move from the traditional to more challenging questions. The following are questions to ask council members and other volunteers that could aid the urban Extension agenda:

Instead of…	**Strongly Consider…**
• What programs do you want us to implement?	• How can you help us improve what we are already doing?
• What are we doing right?	• How can we provide better programs for residents of _____?
• How did you feel about the program?	• How can you help us provide more access to programs in the _____ community?
• Are you willing to continue serving on the council?	• Who would be an asset to serve on the advisory council from _____ community(ies)?

Future Implications

A future trajectory for Extension should include deliberate strategic planning on ways to serve urban centers. Before additional steps are implemented, it is essential that talented individuals with the appropriate skills are recruited and retained in these counties. The results from this study revealed positive perceptions of those who work in urban areas. On average, they had strong affirming attitudes toward their comfort levels and ability to work in an urban county; however, their desire to have adequate training, while also acknowledging other challenges, were apparent. Extension has always recognized the needs of nontraditional audiences, but should now pay equal attention to the needs of its nontraditional employees. Gone are the days when new Extension professionals grew up in 4-H and came from families who are long-time volunteers, visiting the county office at least once a week. Many of our employees in general (and particularly those hired in urban offices) do not have this institutional knowledge.

While hiring those with urban programming acumen within counties is paramount, perhaps more emphasis should be placed on hiring state-level specialists with similar backgrounds who can provide resources to urban personnel. Extension administrators should also be forward-thinking to better approach urban issues through a visionary lens. University administrators, especially those who are new to Land-Grant institutions, should seek educational opportunities and advice on best practices that can aid Extension's growth among urban audiences. While Extension is better understood and still considered a prominent entity in rural counties, administrators and supervisors should appreciate the uniqueness required in implementing urban programs. Furthermore, they should be able to reward urban Extension professionals for their innovation in developing meaningful programs geared toward the needs of their clientele.

In addition, Extension must also take heed of what is most important to urban clientele. Given that 4-H is a recognized entity valued regardless of localities, there should be a push to capitalize on unique programming that meets the needs of urban youth. Programs and resources related to home horticulture are also a worthy contribution on behalf of Extension, as noted by the respondents of this evaluation. It is imperative that Extension continues to provide audiences with what is necessary to address their needs; however, Extension must be astute when determining ways to meet the demands of other clientele who are unfamiliar with the organization. In order to reach them, Extension must invest in solid marketing plans to publicize programs and services. While extra caution must be taken not to exaggerate Extension's capacity to address urban challenges, we can focus on delivering education resources that are relevant and within the organization's scope.

Summary

Despite past work to enhance the relevancy of Extension in urban communities, questions remain. Young and Vavrina (2014) asked, "Are Extension's efforts to adapt to an increasing

urban landscape attaining the desired impact?" They noted a 1988 survey by Clemson University Extension of the South Carolina legislature that found only 11% of legislators understood Extension to have an educational focus (Miller, 1988). A 1995 national survey of public perceptions of Extension also showed that while the awareness of Extension has remained high, those using the organization's services has declined (Warner, Christenson, Dillman, & Salant, 1996). This study also showed lower usage among those in the Northeast and West, those in urban communities, those of younger ages, and whose who had lower education and income levels. A more recent study by Ohio State University in 2010 found that only 20% of respondents were familiar with Extension programs and services, and awareness was lower among younger respondents, those with lower incomes, and those in more urban areas (Loibl, Diekmann, & Batte, 2010).

Based on previous research, it can be observed that Extension's organizational history tends to lend itself to help define and comprehend its future trajectory. It is clear that a cookie-cutter approach to what has been sufficient in rural communities will not suffice in urban counties. There are simply more people who need to be served, and their needs call for more complex programs and strategies than what have been used during Extension's first century of existence. Moreover, there is a need for urban audiences to see Extension as an asset, just as an individual (but very influential) farmer in a rural county does. Extension has been working in rural communities since its inception, but it must be acknowledged that this legacy is not as salient in urban communities. As a solid, positive reputation has been established in rural society, Extension must be held accountable to build the same or similar image throughout larger towns and cities.

Each city, county, state, and region with their unique contexts deserves the opportunities and resources that Extension can offer. Now is the time to embrace the challenges faced by urban communities to demonstrate the fact that Extension can serve as a relevant organization equipped to address urban issues. This focus, in turn, does not take away from Extension's rural audiences that have been served since the organization's inception but promotes innovation among a rural–urban interface that inherently aligns with Extension's mission.

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Acknowledgements