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Measuring and Articulating the Value of Community Engagement: Lessons Learned from 100 Years of Cooperative Extension Work

Nancy Franz

Abstract

The Cooperative Extension System was created in 1914 with the passage of the Smith-Lever Act. The act provided resources to improve access to education by creating this nationwide organization to bring land-grant university research and resources to people where they lived and worked. Cooperative Extension was the first formal nationwide structure created for university–community engagement. Expectations for Extension as an engaged institution have changed over time. Once seen chiefly as a source of private value for program participants in local communities, Extension is now also expected to provide public value for those not directly involved in Extension programs. After 100 years of community engagement efforts, Cooperative Extension has learned lessons about measuring and articulating the value of engagement related to professional development, program development, funding, structure, and organization development. Other engaged institutions will find important implications for their work from Extension's engagement value lessons.

Introduction

The Cooperative Extension System was created in 1914 with the passage of the Smith-Lever Act. The act provided resources to improve access to education by creating this nationwide organization to bring land-grant university research and resources to people where they lived and worked *(Rasmussen, 1989)*. One hundred years later, Extension educators are located at land-grant university campuses and in county and regional Extension offices across each state and U.S. territory. These educators act as an "extension" of their land-grant university, providing programs in agriculture and natural resources, community and economic development, family and consumer sciences, and 4-H youth development *(Franz & Townson, 2008)*. This national network of 3,000 Extension offices makes this system the largest adult education organization in the United States *(Griffith, 1991)*. Consistent with the land-grant mission, Cooperative Extension is specifically charged with responsibility for engaging with communities to

address economic, environmental, and social issues by living and working within the local context *(Franz & Townson, 2008).*

The Extension Organization

Cooperative Extension has a complex and unique structure. Staffing and funding are derived from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, state government, county government, and revenue from grants, contracts, gifts, and fees. Originally Extension was funded by federal, state, and county government in equal parts, but reductions in these funds have resulted in a wider variety of funding sources. Budgets and funding sources differ across county and state Extension units *(Franz & Townson, 2008)*.

Staffing of Extension units around the country varies widely. Extension administrators, faculty, and program specialists are land-grant university employees working closely with regional and county educators to plan, develop, implement, and evaluate educational programming. A county Extension office could have as few as two staff or as many as 70 *(Franz & Townson, 2008).* These paid staff broaden and deepen educational impact using thousands of volunteers, including 4-H leaders, Master Gardeners, and advisory council members *(Seevers, Graham, & Conklin, 2007)*.

Extension Programming

All Extension workers are charged with community engagement through education. Programs are developed using a model of working with communities to conduct a situational analysis to drive program design and implementation as well as program evaluation and reporting *(Franz & Townson, 2008)*. Extension's educational topics and clients range from developing safe and accessible local food systems in communities to nutrition education for low-resource families to science, technology, engineering, and math career exploration for underserved youth. Extension's clients include all residents in the state or area the land-grant university serves *(Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, 2013)*.

Extension educators use four approaches to engaging with communities: service, content transmission, facilitation, and transformative education. Service activities may include providing soil testing, pressure canner testing, or participation on committees and groups. Extension staff also frequently serve as facilitators of group processes and architects of learning environments to help groups address complex community issues. Extension also has a reputation for disseminating content, specifically research-

based information across a variety of topics for homeowners, businesses, agricultural producers, and communities. All three of these approaches help Extension educators create transformative learning conditions by combining effective content and educational processes to help learners develop new and expanded ways of making more informed decisions about their lives *(Franz, 2003; Franz, Garst, Baughman, Smith, & Peters, 2009; Franz & Townson 2008)*. In conducting this work, Extension faculty and staff engage with a wide variety of partners, including elected officials, nonprofit organizations, faith-based organizations, government agencies, schools, and businesses *(Apps, 2002)*.

Role of Extension in Community–University Engagement

Cooperative Extension was the first formal nationwide structure created for university–community engagement. Over the last 100 years it has become the largest nonformal education organization in the world. In addition, it leads 4-H, the largest youth development organization in the nation *(Seevers, Graham, & Conklin, 2007)*. However, the nature of this land-grant university engagement with communities varies according to local context, reflecting the interests of community members and the interests and capacity of the Extension educators. In many instances, Extension faculty and staff assist communities in developing their own resources for local programming. Engagement has changed over time, having started as university experts taking the traditional role of providing information to clients and now taking the form of Extension educators being more focused on creating and maintaining mutual learning environments with communities in addition to serving as content experts *(Applebee, 2000)*. Applebee assesses Extension engagement with communities by observing that "Context is everything; relationship is all there is" *(p. 421)*.

The role of Extension with community engagement varies across the United States locally and on campus. Some Extension systems are stand alone units in arrangements similar to that at Iowa State University, where the organization is led campuswide by a vice president for extension and outreach. At other institutions, such as Virginia Tech, Extension is led by an associate dean in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Cooperative Extension may also be embedded in a campuswide engagement unit on a land-grant campus. These structural differences shape the funding, staffing, and program focus for Extension work, which in turn determines types of engagement activities and clients. Traditionally,

Extension has a reputation for conducting community–university engagement with rural communities on agricultural topics and 4-H. More accurately, Extension's community engagement takes place in all areas of the country with a wide variety of partners and topics *(McDowell, 2001)*. Extension systems have experimented with a variety of structures and programs to adapt to changing contexts and demographics. Some systems have broadened their program focus to target audiences, and others have moved to supporting more urban or regional educators *(Morse, 2009)*.

The Changing Value Expectations for Extension Engagement

Expectations of Extension's value as an engaged institution have expanded over time. Previously Extension was expected chiefly to provide private value to program participants; now expected outcomes include the public value accruing to those not directly involved in Extension programs *(Kalambokidis, 2004)*. The public's interest in education and Extension used to focus on valuing learning outcomes and documentation of behavior changes resulting from that learning. In the last decade stakeholders, especially elected officials, have come to expect Extension to articulate how engagement with communities changes economic, environmental, and social conditions. This change in value expectations—from the value of program participation and learning and behavior change to the public value of engagement—has spurred a movement in Extension to measure and articulate the public value of Extension's community–university engagement *(Franz, 2011a; Kalambokidis, 2004)*.

The value of Extension engagement with communities has been impacted by the decline of public funding for engagement organizations, the public school standards-based movement, grant funders' expectations that engagement efforts will include evidence-based curriculum (i.e., curriculum reflecting evidence from randomized control trials to prove program outcomes), funders' interest in return on investment, and other expectations of accountability for the use of public funds *(Franz, 2012)*. In response, Extension has begun to utilize expanded measures and more full articulation of the public value of engagement with partners, including the creation of public value statements and stories to be used with the media, decision makers, and funders *(Franz, 2013; Kalambokidis, 2011)*.

The Value Measurement Landscape

Extension has explored a variety of ways to measure the value of engagement for the public good. Initially, program evaluation experts were hired as Extension specialists to conduct rigorous evaluations to reveal the worth of Extension programs. In the mid 1980s some Extension systems began to invest in building program evaluation capacity in all Extension educators to more widely and deeply measure the impact of engagement efforts. Both approaches to staffing engagement evaluation in Extension exist today *(Braverman, Engle, Arnold, & Rennekamp, 2008).*

The logic model has become a common tool for program development in Extension engagement and has been adopted by many funders as a key element for grant applications and program evaluation. Common measures as key indicators of learning, behavior, or condition change across engagement efforts are also being used to better describe the public value of engagement. These indicators can range from the number of community policy changes implemented to support healthy eating to the number of jobs created, the number of program participants taking steps to reduce debt, or the number of parts per million of nitrogen in water bodies before and after engagement activities *(Franz, 2012)*. Extension has been participating in collective impact efforts as an anchor institution in catalyzing and measuring change concerning complex community-based issues *(Hanleybrown, Kania, & Kramer, 2012)*.

Extension educators engaged with communities sometimes find the public value measurement landscape difficult to navigate. They are fearful of applying their program evaluation findings to larger economic, social, and environmental conditions. The focus on evidence-based programs validated by randomized control trials has limited Extension educators' ability to adapt educational activities to their local context. Finally, Extension faculty and staff have requested that more research be conducted to show how their educational programs with communities contribute directly to changes in community conditions *(Franz, 2012)*.

The Value Articulation Landscape

Articulating the value of Extension engagement has changed as funding sources have changed. For much of Extension's history, public funding was substantial and long-term programs were sustained. As public funding has become more competitive and less substantive, community engagement work has become more project-based. This has required building strong relationships with

community partners who can navigate a portfolio of projects from a variety of funding sources, sometimes with predetermined audiences targeted by the funder. Project impact measures that capture data from across a variety of projects have become more important; however, such measures may surface differing values of community members, practitioners, academics, and university administrators about what matters *(Franz, 2012)*.

After a decade of hearing the call to articulate public value of engagement for decision makers and other stakeholders, Extension workers and community partners are working to respond to this request. Extension has a rich and long history of articulating the private value of engaging with individuals, families, and businesses through results such as the 4-H member who has gained leadership skills and become a CEO, the family that has reduced their medical costs due to healthy eating, or the agricultural producer who has reduced inputs and increased outputs due to Extension education. Articulating how these activities contribute to economic, social, or environmental conditions for communities is difficult for many Extension educators and their partners, yet many of them have begun to delve into this approach to sharing impact of community engagement (Franz, 2012).

Value Lessons Learned by Extension

Through 100 years of community engagement work, Cooperative Extension has learned several lessons about measuring and articulating the value of engagement. Professional development opportunities for engagement partners can catalyze measuring and articulating the value of engagement. Extension has found that including the perspectives of economists, program evaluators, and communicators helps Extension workers and community members develop skills to better measure and articulate engagement work through the development and use of value statements and stories *(Franz, 2011a, 2013; Kalambokidis, 2004, 2011)*. The creation of an Extension Public Value Facebook page has helped extend these professional development efforts and reinforce the distinctions between public and private value of engagement. Success has come from engaging early adopters in measuring and determining the value of engagement efforts as well as through providing many examples and formats of engagement value statements and stories for others to adopt.

Extension has been known for its effective community-based program development model. As the need to measure and articulate program value has increased, evaluation has become more integrated into the whole program development process rather than occurring solely at the end of the program. Extension staff and community members are more fully using logic models to plan programs and are determining private and public values to be measured as the program is implemented. Data collection is also integrated into programming rather than conducted separately from program efforts. Program evaluation planning has become a tool through which university and community partners agree upfront on the outputs and outcomes of their collaborative work.

Funding for Extension's engagement with communities has changed over its 100-year history, requiring Extension to become more adept at working with community partners to secure funding for educational programs. Available funding has become more focused on addressing issues rather than supporting ongoing programs. Efforts to measure and articulate the value of Extension's work are increasingly funded by grants, contracts, gifts, and fees. Generating revenue and measuring and articulating engagement value for Extension work have become part of the performance review process for most Extension faculty and staff.

Extension's structure as an organization continues to change to better measure and articulate value. Some Extension systems have made reductions in campus staff to better fund community-based Extension staff. Other systems have specifically added economists, program evaluators, and communicators to their staff to help measure and report the value of Extension's community engagement efforts. Attempts are being made to improve the relationship between data gatherers in communities and engagement value storytellers in Extension administration. This includes adopting new planning, reporting, and promotion and tenure/performance review systems to better capture community engagement data.

Extension's culture is changing to better measure and articulate the value of community engagement and highlight engaged scholarship. Some Extension systems are determining what public values they will overtly pursue with communities across programs. Other Extension systems are selecting and supporting public value champions to catalyze the ability to tell their value story and integrate engaged scholarship more fully into the campus climate. Finally, Extension's culture is shifting to more fully embrace colearning with communities rather than being restricted to the role of an expert resource for communities. This widening of educational

approaches enables true engagement with communities based on a reciprocal exchange of knowledge and resources *(Franz, 2009; Peters & Franz, 2012)*.

Implications for Engaged Institutions

Organizations interested in measuring and articulating the value of engagement work need to support professional development and other learning supports for university faculty and staff and community partners. Opportunities should build awareness and skills to measure the economic, environmental, and social value of engagement. This may require learning with and from economists, program evaluators, communicators, and those directly and indirectly realizing the value of engagement. Use of technology should be encouraged to enhance professional development and help connect people who conduct similar work so they can share successes and lessons learned in communities and on campus. As part of the promotion and tenure process, the production of academic, applied, and community-engaged products that measure the value of engagement should be encouraged *(Franz, 2011b)*.

Faculty, staff, and community partners can enhance engagement value by building value measurement and articulation activities into the program design process using logic models or other program planning tools. Program design should also include all partners determining upfront the mutually intended values of their engagement work. New value determination methods and processes such as social return on investment and collective impact should also be built into program development to explore new ways to show the value of engagement.

Funding proposals for engagement activities are more likely to succeed if they include methods for measuring the value of the activities as well as a plan for articulating that value during and after the project. Addressing community-based issues rather than simply continuing past efforts also enhances revenue generation for engagement efforts. University administrators can also catalyze university–community engagement by tying engagement revenue generation to performance and providing seed grants to help build a foundation for future external funding for engagement.

To support measuring and articulating the value of engagement work, opportunities need to be created for a variety of perspectives to participate in these efforts. Interdisciplinary efforts across campus and across a community allow for a variety of values to surface and be measured. Systems also need to be created to capture

and report the value of engagement during and after engagement activities take place. These systems should connect promotion and tenure dossier development, faculty and staff productivity reports, project and program reports, and community-based reporting needs. Such systems also should include an online repository of engagement value stories and statements for university and community stakeholders to access, share, and emulate.

Engaged organizations need to constantly evolve to be effective engagement partners. Incentives need to be in place for faculty, staff, and community partners to measure and articulate the value of engagement in ways that support the mission of the university and the goals of the community. Those who lead this work should be rewarded internally and also gain recognition externally (through such means as the C. Peter Magrath University Community Engagement Award). Engaged organizations should support a culture that promotes engaged scholarship to improve research, teaching, and resolution of community issues *(Franz, Childers, & Sanderlin, 2012)*. A focus on the public value of engagement can help universities and their community partners find common ground on what matters to academics, practitioners, administrators, elected officials, and community members.

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Nancy Franz is an emeritus professor in the School of Education in the Higher Education Program at Iowa State University. She served with Cooperative Extension in Iowa, New Hampshire, New York, Virginia, and Wisconsin for 33 years. Her research interests include measuring and articulating the public value of community-university engagement and the conditions that promote transformative learning in nonformal educational environments. Her academic degrees are from Northland College, University of Wisconsin–Superior, and Cornell University.