

Land-Grant Universities and Extension: Leveraging the Power of Academia for Economic Development

By Nancy Bowen, CEcD

Extension has long been a valuable economic development partner involved in a wide range of issues, from water quality and agricultural practices to retail and energy. Since passage of the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, extension has provided outreach and non-formal education to strengthen lives and communities across the country.

The original mission of extension was to *extend* the resources of land-grant universities to address areas of public need. Extension sent agents into rural areas to deliver practical educational programs to benefit agricultural, family, youth, and economic development pursuits.

That original mission remains fundamentally unchanged. Despite easy access to almost unlimited information via the Internet, the application of research-based information remains a vital tool to help individuals, organizations, businesses, and communities address local, regional, and statewide issues. As Bruce McPheron of Ohio State University once put it, “Extension is a local presence, understanding of the context of problems and questions – something a Google search can’t provide.”

The Role of Land-Grant Universities in Economic Development

In the early 1980s, universities began to recognize the enhanced roles they could play in community and economic development. Such partnerships have involved technology transfer, neighborhood revitalization, business retention & expansion, entrepreneurship, local food systems, real estate development, and workforce development. The drastic economic downturn in 2008 rekindled discussion about how the extension outreach arm of land-grant universities could become more involved in economic development efforts.

Universities are uniquely positioned to help communities develop local development strategies based on their qualitative assets – human, natural, physical, and locational characteristics that make each place unique. Extension, with offices in or near most counties, provides an easy access point to the research and educational resources of land-grant universities. As an unbiased resource, independent of political boundaries, extension is ideally suited to provide leadership and resources to economic development organizations.

The Extension-led Economic Development Model: Collaboration and Accountability

At times, difficulty defining the appropriate role for extension can hinder development of effective, relevant programs. Luckily, the “extension-led model” clearly defines the role of extension, which positions it as a key, staff-member partner of local economic development organizations. The extension-led model also lays out clear expectations for collaboration and accountability. In Ohio, extension and rural communities have partnered since the 1980s to

improve economic conditions using this approach. The extension-led model can improve economic conditions through increased community engagement and by fostering broad-based collaborative partnerships.

Collaborative advisory groups are developed that include a cross section of representatives from local and regional economic development stakeholders. Extension program developers will look to citizen associations composed of residents who know the local culture and feel a sense of stewardship towards their community's wellbeing. This collaboration allows extension to provide direct access to university resources that enable EDOs to better carry out their various duties. This approach can build public trust and capacity for increased knowledge and improved decision making by area leaders.

With regular reporting to the local, regional, and state governmental bodies, extension educators are held accountable while having the opportunity to have their work evaluated to determine if it is meeting community goals. Special efforts must be made by community leaders and extension educators to keep a community focused on both short- and long-term community development goals.

Extension Programs in Action

Extension has aided EDOs in just about every imaginable economic development function. In Ohio, extension was an early adopter of business retention and expansion practices and helped create numerous BR&E programs. Since 1986, the Ohio State University Extension's BR&E Program has developed capacity of community leaders via more than 140 BR&E programs in 77 Ohio counties, in both urban and suburban areas. Extension professionals recently partnered with residents and leaders in Weinland Park, a neighborhood in Columbus, to assess the business environment, identify needs, and develop an action strategy using OSU's BR&E best practices.

In terms of workforce development, OSU's STEM Pathways program aims to increase youth curiosity, logical thinking, problem-solving skills, and team communication abilities, to ensure tomorrow's workforce is highly skilled and globally competitive. Extension professionals teach the STEM program curriculum directly to students and in a train-the-trainer format for the teachers who will then deliver the program.

Energy development, including renewables and shale gas, is an emerging focus area for many extension professionals. In Ohio, extension has been quick to respond to this growing field by creating the Energy Development Field Specialist position. With this position, new programs have been developed to help businesses and communities assess the costs and benefits of energy development. The commissioners of Wyandot County recently enlisted extension to conduct a survey of residents and land owners on their feelings toward wind farm development. Survey findings enabled the county commissioners to decide whether wind development was a good fit for the county.

Most of extension's work is research-based, involving collecting, compiling, and analyzing original data through surveys, focus groups, and other outreach techniques. For instance, extension professionals implement a variety of qualitative and quantitative tools to help communities better understand their local economy's trends and conditions.

The Economic Impact Analysis and Retail Market Analysis programs are good examples. Both programs are frequently implemented to help communities measure change in their local economies to guide decision-making. Extension professionals recently completed a Retail Market Analysis project to identify retail trends in collaboration with Shelby County's EDO. The results informed decision-makers as to which retail sectors were growing and identified gaps in the retail market.

How to Engage With Your Local Extension

Over the last century, extension has adapted to changing times and landscapes and continues to address a wide range of human, plant, and animal needs in both urban and rural areas. Extension can be found in all 50 states, with about 2,900 offices nationwide. In many states, county offices have consolidated into regional centers. Regardless, extension services can be made available to communities, businesses, and organizations of any size and location.

How do economic developers find out about extension services? Typically, stakeholders hear about services and contact extension directly, or extension professionals reach out through workshops and forums about their programs and resources. Extension professionals are frequent speakers at a variety of conferences and meetings at the local, state, and national levels. Economic developers are also often in contact with extension professionals as co-members on boards of community and economic development organizations.

Extension professionals and resources are also widely available online. Economic developers can find out more about extension services on university websites, many of which have extensive links to blogs and social media sites. A somewhat new initiative, "[eXtension](#)", is an internet-based portal with access to specialized information and research on a wide range of topics from land-grant universities across the country.

The pursuit of meaningful and productive partnerships is a core principle of extension. Extension professionals seek out opportunities to collaborate on mutually beneficial projects and welcome new project ideas from economic developers and others. Economic developers should partner with extension to leverage a wide range of useful university resources.

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