

Strategic Directions in Community and Economic Development Extension and Research in the Northeast: Building a Stronger Network in a Critical Time



The Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development

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Introduction

Across the Northeast, communities and regions face important and new challenges in the 21st Century – challenges that have never before been more urgent, diverse, or complex. Although community development programming varies from state-to-state across the region, a key common role for Cooperative Extension has long been to facilitate and strengthen community learning, dialog and decision-making. A clear and compelling need exists for the Cooperative Extension System to continually assess and strengthen its commitment and participation in delivering the science-based information our communities need in order to make informed and meaningful choices.

Effectively meeting these goals in a rapidly changing environment will require an enhanced and more dynamic alignment between community needs and our collective research and extension portfolio. Rather than being seen as a separate program area in competition for scarce resources, economic and community development skills and science-based information need to be increasingly seen as integral components of almost everything that the land grant system was created to achieve and seeks to provide.

We are at a critical juncture. Mobilizing and strategically directing our resources in the next few years will allow us to capitalize on a wide range of opportunities to be relevant and important players in community development outreach, research and policy formation. This document provides our extension and research colleagues with the information they need to advance the goals of both enhancing support for our existing community and economic development research and programming infrastructure as well as making the strategic investments necessary to build our capacity to positively impact our states and communities. In addition, these efforts must increasingly be augmented by collaborative efforts to ensure that we increase the visibility of these impacts.

This document outlines recommendations and a brief overview of the context in which these decisions will have to be made. It also discusses several salient considerations that need to be kept in focus as we seek to address these critical issues. The conclusions are based on recent survey results, an analysis of program allocations across the Northeast, and numerous discussions with state contacts, administrators, faculty, and county based educators.

This is a collaborative project of The Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development (NERCRD), the Northeast section of the National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals (NACDEP) and Penn State and Cornell Cooperative Extension.¹

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This document also serves as a companion piece to two recent documents: “Cooperative Extension’s Community Development Foundation of Practice” (January 2005) <http://www.ncrcrd.iastate.edu/projects/corecomp/fop.pdf> and the results from a recent survey to assess the priorities and perspectives of Extension professionals across the region. (Economic and Community Development Issues and Priorities for Extension and Research October 2005) <http://www.ncrcrd.psu.edu>. This brief overview is intended as an “internal” document for discussion purposes and has not been written for our external partners or stakeholders.

Recommendations for Strengthening the Northeast Community and Economic Development Extension and Research Network

To address the critical issues we now confront, land grant universities throughout the Northeast will need to:

- Build core competencies and a greater understanding of community development principles and practices for Extension professionals across all program areas as rapidly as possible;
- Articulate and substantiate the public value and program impact claims of Northeast community and economic development programming;
- Utilize the results of the Northeast Survey of CED Extension Professionals as a springboard for discussion to focus research and programming on the most prominent issues where we can make an impact;
- Proactively seek to strengthen the research-extension connection and increase the visibility of community- and economic development-related research within their institutions;
- Strengthen grant writing and external funding efforts to take greater advantage of funding opportunities relevant to community and economic development priorities;
- Work with the national system to capture the research that supports Extension’s community and economic development programming;
- Foster dialogue about the “state” of their community development research and outreach and direct resources to support emerging program and personnel opportunities;
- Increase their collaboration with NERCRD and NACDEP to strengthen the resource pool, focus and impact of community and economic development programs across the region; and
- Actively participate in, and take advantage of emerging opportunities throughout the Northeast to solidify a strong Northeast network.²

In an effort to measure our progress against these goals as well as discuss additional issues important to the region we are also recommending that a one day summit on Northeast Community and Economic Development held in conjunction with the national 2007 NACDEP conference to

² These include the Northeast NACDEP chapter, the Connecting Communities Conference, building support for entrepreneurial learning systems, supporting and growing the Northeast Extension Land Use Network (NEELUN) and connecting it with land use research, What Works: Land Use Education and Research, the 2007 NACDEP conference, a key contacts meeting with D.C. policymakers in collaboration with the other three regional centers, and exploring the development of a community development institute for the New England region, etc.

be hosted by this Northeast Region in the spring of 2007. This opportunity could greatly help us to build a strong foundation of support and momentum culminating in both a call to action and a commitment to work in the spirit of regional partnership around selected priority issues.

Our Changing Communities

Regions and communities everywhere face important and new challenges in the 21st Century. Citizens and communities are looking for healthy environments, a high quality of life, a sense of community, and new economic opportunities. In addition, a continual process of economic restructuring has occurred as we move towards opportunities presented by the “New Economy.”³

Numerous social changes also continue to spread across the Northeast, many of which are related to major demographic shifts. The related needs and opportunities faced by communities in this context are broad and interrelated. The recent survey “Economic and Community Development Issues and Priorities for Extension and Research” noted a striking convergence of similar community-level issues identified in each of the states in the region.

Among other things this suggests an increased emphasis on regional economic and community development with appropriate research and educational strategies while recognizing that important contextual differences that exist from state-to-state and often between regions within a particular state. It should go without saying that these opportunities will require multidisciplinary approaches.

In his article “A Review of the Federal Role in Regional Economic Development,” Mark Drabentstott (2005) describes three eras of regional economic development: (1) the industrial recruiting approach of the 1950s to the 1980s, (2) the cost competition approach from the 1980s to the 1990s, and (3) the current regional competitiveness approach. He emphasizes that today’s approach focuses on innovation and entrepreneurship, and concludes, “If innovation is the fuel for the regions to reinvent their economies, higher education is a critical source of that fuel.” Research and extension clearly play a pivotal role in ensuring that the resources of the land grant system are brought to bear on these challenges.

Community and Economic Development in Extension – An Integral Component of Our Mission and History

What is rarely realized is that community development, rather than being a peripheral program area, has long been at the core of Extension’s espoused mission. Scott Peters, Professor of Education at Cornell University highlights these roots more comprehensively than anyone else. At the February 2005 inaugural NACDEP conference in Las Vegas, Peters underscored that Extension’s community development work was born during our formative years as a great national system. What stands out as key in his research is that the processes and principles of community development have been critical to our work throughout our history. While the language used to describe our community development work may be different than it was a century ago, we have a long history of working with communities.

³ A global, entrepreneurial, knowledge-based economy in which the keys to success lie in the extent to which knowledge, technology, and innovation are embedded in products and services. Rob Atkinson, *The Past and Future of America’s Economy*.

The ultimate welfare of the community does not depend on the balance-sheets of a few industries, but on the character of the people, the moral issues, the nature of home life, the community pride, the public spirit, the readiness of responses to calls for aid, the opportunities of education and recreation and entertainment and cooperative activity as well as of increased daily work and better wages

– Liberty Hyde Bailey, 1918

For example, Peters cites B. T. Galloway speaking in 1915 on the “place and function” of a county agent not as “an individualistic peripatetic dispenser of knowledge;” but rather, as “a community builder,” an “organizer of forces in the building of the community.”

As A. J. Klein of the Federal Office of Education noted in 1930 “The fundamental function of Smith-Lever extension education is the development of rural people themselves. This is accomplished by fostering attitudes of mind and capacities which will enable them to better meet the individual and civic problems with which they are confronted. Unless economic attainment and independence are regarded chiefly as means for advancing the social and cultural life of those living in the open country, the most important purpose of extension education will not be achieved.” While we can argue about how legitimate the word “rural” is to this description, there is little denying that the central and integral role economic and community development play within Extension’s mission is as clear as it is compelling.

Community and Economic Development in Extension Today

Nationally, Cooperative Extension is well positioned to work with citizens and communities in building strong, vibrant and sustainable communities. What is important is that we move from being “positioned” to increasing our active engagement. There is a small renaissance underway both in the Northeast and throughout the nation that seeks to reclaim that history and to embrace the importance of Extension’s community development research and educational programming. The Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development (NERCRD) and the National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals (NACDEP) are motivated to continue this momentum and to work with our federal and state partners to ensure the viability of Extension’s community resources and economic development programs.⁴

“As I travel around the country I consistently hear from community members that Extension must be responsive to their community issues through educational programs. This translates directly into a need to enhance Extension’s community development programming capacity.”
Dr. Colien Hefferan, Administrator, CSREES

⁴ <http://nacdep.net>. Objectives: Our future fiscal, political, and organizational viability is directly linked to our ability to enhance our visibility and broaden our partnerships as a programming and research area within the national Cooperative Extension System.

In Extension's national network, community development is viewed from a broad perspective that includes economic development as well as other important components of a community such as land use, housing, education, civic organizations, leadership development, and not for profit organizations.

NACDEP is poised to promote exactly what so many extension professionals have long felt – a need for increased networking, educational and training programs that advance sound community development practices, and expanded investments in applied social science research. Further, the creation of NACDEP has served for many as an important acknowledgement of this work.

Although community development programming varies from state-to-state and region-to-region, a key role for Cooperative Extension has long been to facilitate community learning, dialog and decision-making. As we have noted, in each case, tangible benefits arise from better aligning research and educational programming to these needs.

Discussions with key state contacts within the Northeast underscore that:

- Extension is increasingly being turned to for assistance in addressing complex issues and that public issues education is in demand
- Extension is in a unique position to approach community development holistically
- Research should help inform policy development
- There is an enhanced call for accountability and impacts and we need to draw from emerging frameworks such as the community capitals framework

The survey of Extension professionals in the Northeast also bears this out. There is a need for a clear path to build the competencies of educators and support multi-state collaborations on common issues. There is also a need to have common foundations so that our extension professionals can fully collaborate as appropriate across the region. We also recognize that state contexts vary and that at times economic development needs to be stressed as community development.⁵

The Northeast is home to approximately 25% of the nation's total and 11% of its non-metro population. It is important to recognize, however, that the region has proportionately fewer Extension FTEs overall compared to the nation, and comparatively fewer and declining numbers of FTEs devoted to community and economic development (see Appendix A). There is a critical need for, and arguably compelling political reasons for us to direct the resources and focus required to ensure that the needs of these residents and the resources of the land grant system are better aligned.

Challenges and Opportunities:

While a number of challenges are implied throughout this document, two opportunities hold particular potential to strengthen the Northeast's community and economic development Extension network. The first has to do with articulating the Public Value of Extension's community and economic development programming. The second relates to building the core competencies of Extension professionals working at the community level.

⁵ This paper presumes that community development is the overall framework with economic development a component; further, that community and economic development are intertwined.

Articulating Our Public Value

A recent conference entitled *Building Extensions Public Value through Community Capital Investments* was sponsored by NERCRD for Extension professionals from across the Northeast, and featured the approach developed by Laura Kalambokidis, Assistant Professor and Extension Economist at the University of Minnesota.⁶ The purpose of the Public Value of Extension Programs workshop was to help secure support for programs with strong public value and to identify programs that do not.

Toward these ends, we need to be able to identify and explain:

- 1) The characteristics of a product or service that call for it to be provided by the public sector
- 2) Which of those characteristics does a specific Extension program possess
- 3) When should particular products or service be provided by Extension
- 4) How does a specific program satisfy those criteria
- 5) Who should hear the message

This workshop identified three criteria for a product or service to be provided by the public sector:

1. When providing that information allows consumers to make better choices
2. When we need to address crucial concern about fairness
3. When market failure leads to the private sector not providing a good or service at adequate levels

For Extension's decision making processes, we need to be clear about our comparative advantage and maximize our public value impact by substantiating our claims, including articulating both the importance and impact of our research base. There is common agreement within Land Grant Universities that there is a great deal of public value to Extension's community and economic development research and programming but that we need to better articulate and explain this public value and be prepared to offer metrics appropriate to measuring this. This also involves framing indicators, outcomes and impacts.

It also points to issues related to how we characterize our work. If we can better articulate the public value of what we do then we may add some clarity to what we call our work (e.g., community development, versus economic development, versus community and economic development, etc).

Land grant universities are uniquely situated to advance the theoretical base for strong and vibrant communities. We know that research has shown that communities that apply and practice good community development principles do better than those that do not. Extension can be a leader in working with sister organizations and their professional development by offering them a research base.

⁶ More info at: http://www.cas.nercrd.psu.edu/Comm_Capitals_Conf/CommCapFramework.htm

Enhancing Core Competencies

The rapid changes occurring in communities across the nation have brought more Extension professionals into economic and community development work. Most have formal educational backgrounds and career experiences in other disciplines, however. The need for Extension professionals to have basic knowledge and skills in the processes, tools and techniques of economic and community development is increasing as is the need for an understanding of the complexities and interdisciplinary nature of this work. Rather than being seen as a separate program area in competition for scarce resources, economic and community development skills and information

“A clear and compelling need exists for the Cooperative Extension System to continually assess and strengthen its commitment to, and role in, delivering the science-based information communities need in order to make the most informed and effective choices possible. This is becoming more urgent with the spread of weblogs and other communication venues in which opinion and science-based fact are increasingly blurred and impossible to separate for lay audiences.”

Stephan Goetz, Director NERCRD

need to be increasingly seen as an integral component of almost everything that the Land Grant System was designed to achieve. A more in-depth discussion of these issues can be found in the “Foundation of Practice,” <http://www.ncrcrd.iastate.edu/projects/corecomp/fop.pdf>

A renewal is underway throughout the nation to more thoughtfully develop the competencies of extension professionals to enhance their work with communities. There are also emerging frameworks and workshops to aid educators in the quest to see our work and communities from a fresh perspective.

Successful Extension-facilitated community initiatives involve community-driven agendas and actions that foster community viability and sustainability. In working with communities, educators need competencies in three major components:

1. Understanding Communities and Their Dynamics

The first component focuses on understanding the context of community, a basic knowledge of the community and its dynamics which includes demographics, economics, power structure, natural resources and sustainability, and community development processes.

2. Developing Successful Community Initiatives

The second component of the Foundation of Practice follows the first component and focuses on community development practice and processes to achieve broad based participation as well as positive impacts. This includes participatory planning, implementation and project management, facilitating group meetings, building community collaborations and partnerships, and evaluation).

3. Areas of Specialization and Emphasis

This third component is different from the other two in that it builds outward from the symbiotic relationship that exists between understanding communities and developing successful community initiatives. This component focuses on the specific content areas or

specialization of community development such as economic and workforce development, local government, entrepreneurship development, leadership and civic engagement, and agricultural based community economic development.

The Northeast region could build on the work of our colleagues in the North Central region and offer training and curricula on the core competencies associated with understanding communities and their dynamics and developing successful community initiatives. In the North Central region they are offering such training via a distance learning approach. NERCRD could follow their lead while exploring additional efforts to offer professional development in these competencies.

Summary

The Land Grant Universities in the Northeast can only take advantage of this critical time in our history if we refocus our attention on the needs and potential community and economic development extension and research, work collaboratively with each other and develop synergies with such allied organizations as The Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development and the National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals.

The collaboration would involve a conscious decision to invest in economic and community development research and extension. But that investment should occur in the areas in which we can articulate the public value of our work and in which we have a research base. That broad investment should also include providing core community development competency training to our Extension professionals. The combination of a clear mission, competent educators, and relevant and updated research is integral to our capacity to positively impact our communities and the Northeast Region.