

CHAPTER I

Introduction

The Role of Extension Education in Supporting Children, Youth, Families, and Communities

Maria Rosario T. de Guzman and Holly Hatton

In Douglas County, Nebraska, two graduate students and two Extension educators are working with a dozen youth who are putting finishing touches on their posters as part of their mock presidential campaigns. Situated in a middle school in a predominantly Latinx neighborhood, participants are part of Youth Arise – an afterschool program designed to foster civic engagement among youth from underserved communities. Over 3,000 miles west, two nutrition Extension educators are facilitating a youth photovoice project with twenty-five sixth-grade students in Madera County, California. This school is in a highly agricultural community in the Central Valley Region, with a large population of Hispanic/Latinx residents and indigenous groups from Mexico. The project aims to document youth's experiences and challenges with water access and consumption while in school and provides opportunities for youth to learn about the importance of sleep, good nutrition, and regular physical activity for their health.¹ On the Eastern part of the country, educators are engaging in Wellness Enhancing Physical Activity for Young Children (WE PLAY), an online program designed to foster participants' skills in leading active play, promoting physical activity, and implementing inclusive practices with typically developing preschool children and children with autism spectrum disorder. WE PLAY represents a partnership between Penn State Extension's Better Kid Care and Northeastern University and has to date reached approximately 6,000 educators.²

The earlier scenarios illustrate the diversity in audiences, the wide range of contexts, and breadth of programming in which contemporary

¹ Example is provided by Dr. Irene Padasas, Community Health and Nutrition Advisor, UCCE Tulare, Kings, Madera, & Fresno Counties.

² Example provided by Dr. Benjamin Bayly, Assistant Professor of Family Studies, Child, and Youth Development; and Academic Lead for Penn State Extension's Better Kid Care.

Extension professionals engage. As the largest publicly funded, nonformal education system in the United States, Cooperative Extension (a.k.a. “Extension,” “Agricultural Extension”) serves as the conduit through which scientific knowledge generated in and through state agricultural experiment stations (AES) and land-grant universities (LGUs) in the United States is translated and shared directly to its constituents. Since its inception over 100 years ago, Extension has been integral in developing, delivering, co-creating, and applying cutting-edge knowledge in such domains as agriculture and natural resources, youth development, family and consumer sciences, and community and rural development (Gould, Steele, & Woodrum, 2014). Extension has had a long history of transforming science into everyday solutions through educational programs and collaborative partnerships – shaping the ways in which we cultivate and preserve food, how we educate and care for our children, manage our finances, work with communities, and support populations disproportionately affected by structural inequities.

Scholars and policymakers have long acknowledged that helping the broader population understand the Extension system and preparing future Extension professionals is critical to Extension’s sustainability and success in carrying out its charge (Arnold & Place, 2010; Wang, 2014). However, despite Extension’s magnitude and knowledge among key constituents and stakeholders regarding its contributions to the US economy and society, Extension has been dubbed as the “best kept secret” in academia. In part, this lack of visibility is not only due to limited marketing and branding of programs within communities but also because of a lack of integration of Extension within the broader undergraduate curriculum (Brodeur et al., 2011; DeBord, 2007). Although the lives of most, if not all, people in the United States have been influenced by advances and technologies resulting from Extension, awareness is lacking even among LGU faculty and students about this entity. Uplifting the importance of Extension as an integral partner in addressing real-world problems can be achieved by fostering stronger connections between Extension and the broader LGU system, and between Extension and the public. Additionally, more robust partnerships between Extension and non-Extension units within land-grant institutions are needed to strengthen research and formal teaching in ways that provide ecological grounding and enhance direct relevance of academic pursuits. In short, helping the broader academe and the public understand the contemporary Extension system can facilitate stronger engagement and broader impact across many fields.

1.1 The Current Volume

The goal of this volume is to extend readers' understanding of the Extension system and its importance, with particular focus on its role in the field of the social sciences, and conversely, the role of the social sciences in Extension. The call for papers generated a broad range of articles – each illustrative of the impact-focused work in which Extension is engaged, the variety of contexts in which it is embedded, and the critically important role that research plays as the basis of programming. This volume brings together leading and emerging scholars to discuss how Extension is addressing issues relevant to children, youth, families, and communities across the country today, as well as how Extension fulfills its charge in the foreseeable future.

Part I provides a broad overview of efforts within Extension to support children, youth, families, and communities. In Chapter 2, J. Kale Monk discusses the critical role of research in the Extension enterprise – both as the basis of program development and as a means of ensuring program quality and impact through evaluation. In Chapter 3, Yoshie Sano, Ann A. Berry, and Christopher T. Sneed discuss the role of Extension in supporting families in rural communities and describe the Rural Families Speak project – a cutting-edge network that brings together researchers and Extension professionals who together address the needs of underserved populations. Chapter 4, by Julie M. Fox, undertakes a critical discussion of the unique factors that need to be taken into consideration when addressing well-being among families in urban contexts. Fox highlights both the common competencies needed across Extension programming and unique considerations needed to address urban needs, as well as provides snapshots of successful programming conducted in large urban areas in several regions of the country.

Part II highlights Extension programs that address key needs and issues facing children, youth, families, and communities today. Constance C. Beecher and Teresa A. Byington (Chapter 5) describe Extension efforts to support young children, illustrating how Extension addresses well-being at multiple levels of programming, for instance, by providing programming for children, caregivers, and educators; and by addressing contextual issues that impact children. Chapter 6, by Jodi Dworkin, is a discussion of various efforts within Extension to support youth development, with a specific focus on programs that engage and empower families – thus building capacity for sustained support of youth. Chapter 7, by Theresa M. Ferrari and Mary E. Arnold, is a discussion of 4-H – the largest youth organization in the country. This chapter illustrates how 4-H exemplifies social

science in action, with programming informed by research and continued evolution of program models with new information over the years. In Chapter 8, Lisa Franzen-Castle, Michelle Krehbiel, and Jean Ann Fischer describe how Extension takes a multipronged and collaborative approach to addressing critical issues, leveraging key partnerships at multiple levels (e.g., local, federal), and providing much-needed support for constituents. And in Chapter 9, Surin Kim, Maria Rosario T. de Guzman, Claire Nicholas, Yunqi Wang, Irene Padasas, and Olivia Kennedy describe the growing Extension efforts within the field of youth entrepreneurship education. They propose that Extension can draw insights from the rich body of research on entrepreneurship conducted in the social and behavioral sciences to guide the growing efforts in Extension within this field.

Part III addresses contemporary challenges and issues that Extension is facing. In Chapter 10, Kieu Anh Do and Virginie Zoumenou discuss the demographic shifts and potential implications for the continued relevance of Extension. In Chapter 11, Kerrie Fanning, Jiwon Yoon, and Margaret L. Kerr share promising ways for Extension to engage underserved and underrepresented fathers to highlight potential avenues for engaging historically marginalized communities in Extension work and programming. Chapter 12, by Joseph L. Donaldson, tackles an issue that is critical for the sustainability of Extension, that is, the training of future professionals in the field. Donaldson notes that gaps exist in formal preparation for Extension careers but describes avenues for hopeful Extension professionals to gain experience and training to enter a career in this field. Finally, in Chapter 13, Jemalyn Griffin and Holly Hatton discuss the shifting information landscape and its implications for the continued relevance of Extension and highlight an example of how Extension can partner with university entities with expertise in mass communication.

1.2 Themes, Conclusions, and Remaining Questions

Several key themes are evident from the contributions that highlight the value of Extension and provide insights regarding key challenges and future directions:

1.2.1 *Extension's Rich History and Continued Relevance Today*

Extension has had a rich history of transforming lives and communities across the country but faces the task of reevaluating its continued relevance in today's rapidly shifting information and demographic

landscape. Almost every chapter in this volume noted Extension's history of translating intellectual resources and technological innovations for the direct benefit of individuals and communities. Extension was established through a series of landmark legislations including the Morrill Act of 1862 that formed the land-grant colleges and universities, the Hatch Act of 1887 that funded the development of state AES, which continue to generate important knowledge and innovations in agriculture and other fields, and the Morrill Act of 1890 that banned the exclusion of Blacks from land-grant institutions and led to the formation of Historically Black Colleges and Universities across the country. Extension itself was formally established by Congress through the Smith–Lever Act of 1914 that appropriated resources to “aid in diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture, home economics, and rural energy...” and describing Extension work as consisting of “the development of practical applications of research knowledge and giving of instruction and practical demonstrations of existing or improved practices or technologies in agriculture, home economics, and rural energy,” as well as subjects relevant to communities and its residents (Smith–Lever Act, 1914). Thus, for over a century, Extension has served as a unique and robust system to collaborate, generate, and disseminate research, as well as to engage in mission-oriented work to support communities in optimizing their current and future circumstances. Extension has harnessed the expertise of countless scholars and professionals in each of the US land-grant colleges and universities housed on university campuses, experimental stations, and in offices reaching each of the nation's over 3,000 counties.

Yet, across Extension's lifetime, significant shifts have occurred that challenge and/or bring to question its continued relevance. Do and Zoumenou (Chapter 10) contrast the demographics of the US population at Extension's inception versus today. They note that population growth, increasing ethnic and racial diversity shifts in traditional family forms (e.g., higher rates of single parenthood, lower rates of marriage, higher rates of divorce), and changes in the population's age stratification may have the most important implications for how and for whom Extension does its work. As the authors note, Extension is at a “critical junction” and needs to explore ways to fulfill its original charge against a context that has shifted dramatically. Fanning and colleagues (Chapter 11) further highlight the continued relevance of Extension by elevating its critically important role of in reaching and working with historically underrepresented communities. Further, they propose and highlight unique ways

that Extension can and has engaged underserved communities to ensure that programming and resources are holistic and reflect community wisdom and representation.

Nonetheless, Extension has shown how it can evolve to meet the needs of its constituents amid times of change. Kim and colleagues' (Chapter 9) discussion of entrepreneurship education efforts illustrates how new fields of inquiry and programming develop within Extension in response to emergent issues and new information and innovations from the social sciences. Extension programming within youth entrepreneurship education is relatively new but draws from a substantial body of scholarship on the potential of entrepreneurial efforts to uplift communities and the value of entrepreneurial thinking. Julie M. Fox (Chapter 4) reminds us that Extension was initially designed to bring the intellectual resources of the land-grant system to rural populations. Yet today, the contemporary Extension system has substantial presence within suburban and urban communities. Fox provides examples of programs specifically designed for audiences residing in more densely populated regions, highlighting how Extension has evolved to reach populations that were not its prime focus when it was created more than a century ago.

Describing yet another type of shift, Griffin and Hatton (Chapter 13) address the issue of accelerating change within the information landscape. Advances in informational technology now facilitate access to information – putting into question Extension's role in disseminating information to the broader population in relevant, responsible, and meaningful ways. However, as opposed to making Extension obsolete, the authors propose that Extension now has the potential to increase engagement by involving audiences as cocreators of content rather than as passive recipients.

1.2.2 Extension's Approach to Supporting Children, Youth, Families, and Communities Is Uniquely Collaborative, Interdisciplinary, and Innovative

In recent decades, there has been growing recognition for the value of interdisciplinary approaches in conducting research and in addressing issues facing children, youth, families, and communities (Bronstein, 2003; Moody & Darbellay, 2019). Interdisciplinary collaborations bring together varied but potentially complementary perspectives that can prove synergistic in addressing complex issues (Derry & Schunn, 2005). By its very structure, Extension takes a collaborative (i.e., "cooperative") approach to engagement. As a nationwide nonformal and translational education system, Extension is operated through each of the nation's LGUs in

collaboration with government agencies and entities at the federal (i.e., United States Department of Agriculture [USDA]-National Institute for Food and Agriculture [NIFA]), state (i.e., LGUs, AES) and local levels (e.g., county offices, local organizations) (APLU, n.d.; USDA-NIFA, n.d.). Funding structures similarly reflect this collaborative nature, with state Extension efforts typically supported by a combination of government appropriations at federal, state, and county levels in combination with grants and other funding sources (APLU, n.d.).

Several key examples can be drawn from chapters in this volume to further illustrate the collaborative and interdisciplinary approach taken within Extension, and how efforts address the broader ecology of children, youth, and families. Franzen-Castle and colleagues (Chapter 8) describe Extension programs that support food, nutrition, and health issues of families. They provide an in-depth discussion of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), SNAP Education, and other exemplars of programming that leverage community partnerships and address well-being of constituents with both individual-level interventions and changes to the broader context through policy change. Dworkin (Chapter 6) also describes an ecological and collaborative approach to programming – describing Extension youth development programs across the country that do not just address individuals' well-being but also engages families and the broader community as partners to support youth.

Perhaps it is due to Extension's collaborative and issue-focused nature that it has been able to engage constituents in agile and responsive ways. Extension has been at the forefront of rapid responses – “extending” scholarship in real time and in situations wherein immediate responses are needed. Several Extension efforts have been deployed across the country during natural and man-made disasters, for example, in 2019, when historic and catastrophic floods hit the central regions of Nebraska – devastating homes, communities, and farmlands. With hundreds of professionals already situated in or serving the state's ninety-three counties, Extension was able to rapidly deploy assistance and bring to bear the university's intellectual resources to address the challenges that resulted from this event. Responses included organizing and deploying volunteers for debris removal and engaging agricultural scientists to share their expertise on how to handle damaged crops and farmlands, business- and entrepreneurship-focused educators to assist business owners in addressing lost sources of livelihoods, and early childhood and youth Extension scholars to develop resources to mitigate the trauma on children and families (Reed, 2022).

The rapid response of Extension was again needed and applied multiple times over just one year later during the COVID pandemic (Narine & Meier, 2020). Across the country, Extension entities supported children, youth, and families by disseminating information regarding health and safety at the time of COVID, distributing resources about vaccines and helping implement clinics, supporting well-being by providing guidance to help navigate social isolation, and by providing much-needed resources through online and hybrid activities for children during one of the greatest disruptions in education and normative life that the United States had collectively faced (USDA, 2021).

With a focus on addressing issues rather than being siloed within specific disciplinary lines, Extension is primed to bring together the necessary teams and experts to provide rapid and innovative responses both in the field and in research. It is not atypical to find child-, youth-, and family-focused Extension programs that engage early childhood educators alongside entomologists, youth development professionals working with agricultural engineers, and family scientists collaborating with finance experts. A common theme across the chapters was the instrumental role of community-based participatory approaches to effectively address issues facing children, youth, families, and communities that can require a different way of engaging and working with those most affected by gaps in resources, information, and programming. With shifts in the demography of its audience, accelerating advances in information technology, paired with diminishing resources, we propose that Extension continues to be well positioned to make significant and transformative impacts in the lives of children, youth, families, and communities for the foreseeable future.

1.2.3 Remaining Challenges and Potential Responses

Notwithstanding Extensions' potential for impact-focused and transformative work, contributions to this volume make evident several challenges and questions that remain:

Diminishing resources and increased demands. Funding for Extension has declined over the years – in both the amount and the proportion of state and federal dollars that support Extension efforts (Coppess et al., 2018; Wang, 2014). At the same time, Extension professionals are today tasked with increased responsibilities, for instance, to participate in the production of scholarship and to meet expectations for high-quality programming despite (and perhaps partly because of) diminishing resources. Monk (Chapter 2) discusses the complex charge of many

Extension professionals to not just disseminate but also engage in research despite sometimes limited training and/or absent explicit job duties that reflect these responsibilities. Whereas earlier Extension positions focused primarily on translating research and dissemination through program development, today's Extension professionals are also tasked with implementing rigorous evaluations and contributing to the broader research enterprise. Engaged scholarship through both basic and applied research is clearly essential in Extension. Nonetheless, the need to contribute to both programming and evaluation, and at times even basic research, can put a significant strain on an already challenged system.

In response to diminishing resources and increased demands, emergent tools may offer some assistance to ease the burden for the already taxed Extension professionals (e.g., see Griffin & Hatton this volume). However, such tools may also herald in even more challenges such that Extension professionals are not just developing resources but also having to navigate means of information distribution, serving as researchers, content creators, and managers of social media accounts, for example.

Griffin and Hatton discuss in their chapter that the availability of technologies makes it possible to reach a broader audience today at unprecedented levels. Technological innovations are changing how Extension is doing its work, on the one hand facilitating program and content development, and on the other hand imposing potential challenges. They propose at least one path toward easing the burden of navigating this changing information landscape, that is, engaging partners that have specific expertise in addressing such issues. Extension already has a history of leveraging multiple partners to tackle complex issues. Taking a similar approach as a means of navigating diminishing resources may prove beneficial, if not necessary.

Hiring and preparing the next generation of Extension professionals. Donaldson (Chapter 12) points to another challenge within Extension, that is, the need to prepare the next generation of professionals to ensure sustainability of the Extension enterprise. Currently, few programs exist that specifically provide professional learning and development for Extension careers. Some universities offer master's level degrees in agricultural extension and/or extension education (e.g., Colorado State University, Virginia Tech University, University of Arkansas), though such training opportunities are rare. Learning experiences specifically for professionals wishing to undertake a career in Extension focused on children, youth, and families are difficult to find. Instead, personnel receive professional development and experiences in specific fields (e.g., nutrition,

early childhood education, family science, youth development) and then gain the “extension” aspect of their profession on-the-job. Thus, there is a substantial gap and opportunity to supplement current training for professionals in early childhood, youth development, and family science with Extension experience and education. This instructional gap may in fact pose an opportunity for departments with Extension charges to include coursework that provides information about Extension, internships, and skills to work therein.

Continued relevance and shifts in how Extension conducts its work.

In the 100+ years of its existence, the charge of Extension has remained the same – to translate “research into action” and to bring the intellectual resources, innovations, and insights from research stations and universities directly into the hands of our constituents. Funding structures, the informational landscape, and demographics of our audiences, nonetheless, have shifted dramatically. Against this backdrop, Extension must ask such important questions as how it can continue to be relevant in a world where there is greater access to information, where audiences have also become content creators, where the demographics of our audience have diverged tremendously from the original target for which Extension was developed, and where structural barriers continue to contribute to inequities across racial, ethnic, and other sociodemographic lines as was made evident during the COVID pandemic and the summer of 2020 that spotlighted such realities.

As it did during its first 100 years, Extension continues to evolve and is already showing shifts in the ways it is conducting its work to match the contextual, demographic, and technological changes we are seeing today. Contributions to this volume illustrate the collaborative, innovative, and impact-focused work that continues to make important contributions in supporting children, youth, families, and communities across the country. Perhaps today more than ever, Extension will need to lead the way in building and maintaining sustainable partnerships across disciplines and with organizations at the local, state, and national levels to tackle complex issues considering diminishing resources. Extension will also need to effectively show its impact and return on investment to illustrate its value to federal, state, and local stakeholders (Wang, 2014). Finally, it is critical for Extension to remain agile, to continue focusing on impact that may, in the future, necessitate new methods of engagement, new partners, and new ways of understanding solutions to address issues and in delivering information. Extension has successfully delivered resources to communities since its establishment and has cocreated solutions to wicked problems

for decades. Contributions to this volume indicate a promising start to the next century of delivering and cocreating impactful programming to support the well-being of children, youth, families, and communities.

References

- APLU. (n.d.). *Cooperative Extension Section (CES)*. Retrieved on July 18, 2023 from www.aplu.org/members/commissions/food-environment-and-renewable-resources/board-on-agriculture-assembly/cooperative-extension-section/
- Arnold, S., & Place, N. (2010). What influences agents to pursue a career in Extension? *The Journal of Extension*, 48(1), Article 9. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol48/iss1/9>
- Brodeur, C. W., Higgins, C., Galindo-Gonzalez, S., Craig, D. D., & Haile, T. (2011). Designing a competency-based new county extension personnel training program: A novel approach. *The Journal of Extension*, 49(3), Article 2. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol49/iss3/2>
- Bronstein, L. R. (2003). A model for interdisciplinary collaboration. *Social Work*, 48(3), 297–306. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/48.3.297>
- Coppess, J., Paulson, N., Schnitkey, G., & Zulauf, C. (2018). Cooperative Extension challenges: Funding and remaining relevant. *AgFax*. 2018 August. Retrieved on November 22, 2023 from www.agfax.com/2018/08/24/cooperative-extension-challenges-funding-and-remaining-relevant/
- DeBord, K. (2007). How integrated extension programming helps market Cooperative Extension: The North Carolina recommendation. *The Journal of Extension*, 45(5), Article 2.
- Derry, S. J., & Schunn, C. D. (2005). Interdisciplinarity: A beautiful but dangerous beast. In S. J. Derry, C. D. Schunn, & M. A. Gernsbacher (Eds.), *Interdisciplinary collaboration: An emerging cognitive science* (pp. xii–xx). Taylor and Francis.
- Gould, F. I., Steele, D., & Woodrum, W. J. (2014). Cooperative Extension: A century of innovation. *The Journal of Extension*, 52(1), Article 3. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol52/iss1/3>
- Moody, Z., & Darbellay, F. (2019). Studying childhood, children, and their rights: The challenge of interdisciplinarity. *Childhood*, 26(1), 8–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568218798016>
- Narine, L., & Meier, C. (2020). Responding in a time of crisis: Assessing extension efforts during COVID-19. *Advancements in Agricultural Development*, 1(2), 12–23. <https://doi.org/10.37433/aad.v1i2.35>
- Reed, L. (2022). Nebraska U continues to assist with 2019 flooding recovery. *Nebraska Today*. 2022 March. Retrieved on November 23, 2023 from <https://news.unl.edu/newsrooms/today/article/nebraska-u-continues-to-assist-with-2019-flooding-recovery/>
- Smith–Lever Act. (1914). www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/COMPS-10296/pdf/COMPS-10296.pdf

- USDA-NIFA. (2021). *USDA-NIFA, CDC and Cooperative Extension team up for vaccine education in rural America*. Retrieved from www.nifa.usda.gov/about-nifa/press-releases/usda-nifa-cdc-cooperative-extension-team-vaccine-education-rural-america
- USDA-NIFA. (n.d.). *Cooperative Extension System*. Retrieved July 18, 2023 from www.nifa.usda.gov/about-nifa/how-we-work/extension/cooperative-extension-system
- Wang, S. L. (2014). Cooperative Extension System: Trends and economic impacts on U.S. agriculture. *Choices: The Magazine of Food, Farm, and Resource Issues. Agricultural and Applied Economics Association*, 29(1), 1–8.