

Extension's Response to the Change in Public Value: Considerations for Ensuring Financial Security for the Cooperative Extension System

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Cooperative Extension is a partnership of county, state, and federal governments to fund the translation and community education of applied research from the land-grant university system. Cooperative Extension's funding since the 1980s has experienced a few key trends such as federal budget stagnation as well as state and county cyclic funding cycles based on the states' economic health. Accompanying the state-level budget cuts have been calls for Cooperative Extension to reinvent and improve communication about what it does. As budget stability has become a greater concern, ideas around value and return on investment have become more integrated into the messaging about why Cooperative Extension should be funded. These economic terms reflect the integration of neoliberalism's frame. In a larger qualitative research study about how Cooperative Extension administrators recognize the need for change, funding emerged as a fundamental influence of organization adaptation. The public contract between citizen, legislature, and public-serving organizations has changed to, "What is the return on investment?" To respond to the shifting narrative, it was necessary to assess, measure, and communicate value. However, administrators also recognized relationships mattered to how the message was received by legislators and other funders.

Keywords: organization environment, public value, evaluation, neoliberalism, public funding trends, adaptive leadership

Introduction

The narrative over the last 30 years has been that Cooperative Extension (Extension), the outreach branch of the Land-grant University (LGU) system, needs to more effectively communicate positive outcomes to stakeholders, particularly legislators, to increase public

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support (Conone, 1991; Cummings & Boleman, 2006; Fetsch & Bolen, 1989; Franz, 2013; Graf, 1993). Extension program implementers and administrators are expected to improve the communication of Extension's value to stakeholders (Franz, 2013), improve the measures of impacts (Franz et al., 2014), and engage in organizational planning/strategizing, as expected of public sector and not-for-profit organizations, so that Extension can compete in a modern funding climate. Strategies to produce more evaluation results to support improved communication about public value have focused on increasing evaluation efforts and the use of impact statements (Kalambokidis, 2011). The narrative suggests that if Extension does a better job of documenting and communicating the impact and relevance of Extension education programs to funders, then more appropriate financial resources will follow (Cummings & Boleman, 2006; Davis, 2012; Franz, 2013; Kalambokidis, 2011; Stup, 2003; Zotz, 2004). While this narrative has been identified in the literature for decades, the Cooperative Extension system continues to experience financial instability.

The above responses have been technical approaches to the philosophical shift that has been experienced in the dominant culture, namely the adoption of a firmly neoliberal framework (Thorsen, 2010). Technical responses are known answers to specific problems (Heifetz, 1994). The nationwide Cooperative Extension system has been working to implement technical responses to the adaptive challenge. This paper explores the understanding and recognition by Cooperative Extension administrators of the challenges they face in funding Cooperative Extension programming.

Review of the Literature

Neoliberalism is commonly referred to as an economic theory. Rather, it is a "cultural field" comprised of values, ideologies, and practices. Neoliberalism is customarily "thought of as the return and spread of one specific aspect of the liberal tradition, namely *economic liberalism*" (Thorsen & Lie, 2006, p. 2). Economic liberalism is the belief that the economy should not be disturbed with intervention by the state, and, as much as possible, it should be left up to individuals participating in free and self-regulating markets (Castree, 2010). Economic liberalism and neoliberalism should, in the view of Thorsen and Lie (2006), be held separate. Neoliberalism is a modified or revived form of traditional liberalism based on the belief in free market capitalism and the rights of the individual (Thorsen, 2010).

Giroux (2004) made the argument that neoliberalism's cultural dimensions erode public participation, which is the very nature of democratic life. Under neoliberal policies, the symbolic, educational, and economic capital necessary for engaged citizenship is being undercut (Giroux, 2004). Additionally, neoliberalism has an impact on the language of democracy, education, and the media. These impacts affect democratic institutions (Giroux, 2004). For example, the pressures of neoliberalism have eroded public support for public education. The erosion began in higher-education, and now the use of choice is being used to erode the public

willingness to fund secondary public-education (Buras & Apple, 2005). Where higher-education and public secondary education were tools of democratization by generating access for all citizens to be informed participants, pressures towards individual responsibility recreates inequities, under the guise of market-force efficiency (Ambrosio, 2013; Klees, 2008).

Authors writing on Cooperative Extension have recognized the changing frame of public funding (Franz, 2015; Ilvento, 1997; Kalambokidis, 2004, 2014; Lawrence & Mandal, 2016; McDowell, 2004; McGrath et al., 2007). Franz (2015) acknowledged that “in contemporary United States culture, society demands proof of Extension and LGUs as valuable public goods” (p. 13). Therefore, there have been diverse approaches to measuring and calculating public value.

Strategies for Measuring and Calculating Public Value

When a service is recognized as having significant public value, even citizens who do not directly benefit from the service will endorse its public funding (Kalambokidis, 2004).

Kalambokidis (2004) introduced the use of public value statements to help communicate value to stakeholders and policy decision-makers who may believe that public funding for Cooperative Extension is only justified when the free market fails. The argument achieves a larger purpose when taking evaluation and research results of individuals and connecting the results to larger societal implications.

To build support for Cooperative Extension, the aforementioned strategies of “public value stories and statements” (Chazdon & Paine, 2014; Franz, 2013) or “public good” (Franz, 2015) are terms that have been used in place of the word “impact.” To measure indicators associated with programmatic impacts, an emphasis has been placed on evaluation (Franz et al., 2014; Franz & Archibald, 2018). Evaluation has also been emphasized for program improvement, including knowledge transfer and adoption. Within the translation of program outcomes as public values, there have been efforts to document and relay individual and public goods as public values.

Economic impact has been explored by the LGU system to communicate return on investment from innovation, outreach, and education (Joly et al., 2016). In short, economic impact studies are reducing complex changes to dollars and cents, and placing a monetary value on social, economic, and environmental values created by an intervention, program, policy, or organization. It is harder to measure economic outcomes of human capital development than it is to calculate technology innovation adoption (Travis et al., 2018), making calculating the economic impact of the work of Cooperative Extension particularly challenging.

Cooperative Extension has also turned to the Social Return on Investment (SROI) model to demonstrate its program impacts, which is the process for understanding, measuring, and reporting the social, economic, and environmental values created by an intervention, program, policy, or organization (Banke-Thomas et al., 2015; Scholten et al., 2006). SROI evaluation

aligns with cost-effectiveness analysis, cost-utility analysis, or cost-benefit analysis because the SROI framework is a holistic method supporting exploration of the connection between funding and program outcomes. SROI is a tool to measure the social, economic, and environmental value of the Cooperative Extension system to communicate its value to stakeholders.

Communicating Public Value

To build support for Cooperative Extension, scholars recommend the use of public value stories and statements (Chazdon & Paine, 2014; Franz, 2013). Communication of value is important because an increasing number of policy decision-makers believe that public funding for Extension is only justified when the free market fails (Kalambokidis, 2004). When Extension programs are recognized as having significant public value, even citizens who do not directly benefit from the service may recognize the value of the effort to be supported by public funding (Kalambokidis, 2004). Thus, efforts have been made to translate evaluation and research results of individual programs and to connect the results to larger societal implications. Improved communication of results has not resulted in documented financial stability for Extension.

Adaptive Leadership

Administrators make decisions daily about how to develop strategies that moderate the impacts of environmental factor changes to the organization. How administrators approach organization decisions results in programmatic shifts that have long-term impacts on the organization's ability to rebound and continue to thrive (Nadler & Tushman, 1977, 1980). Both the external and internal look into the organization by administrators requires the use of administrator judgment, analysis, and decision making. These processes are influenced by the organizational environmental factors and the feedback that administrators receive.

Adaptive leadership, first defined by Heifetz (1994), is an approach to assist organizations and individuals in dealing with consequential changes in uncertain times when no clear answers are forthcoming. It is an approach predominantly concerned with how leaders can encourage people to adapt to and face changes, problems, and challenges. According to Heifetz (1994), leaders need to engage in activities that mobilize, motivate, organize, orient, and focus the attention of others. "Adaptive leadership is specifically about change that enables the capacity to thrive" (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 14). Adaptive leadership has been explained as the behaviors of the leader to encourage others to address changes that are central to their lives. Specific strategies are described below.

Get on the Balcony. The leader removes themselves from the fray of the process to gain perspective on what work needs to happen to ensure forward motion toward challenge resolution (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). This shift in perspective may be about task orientation for an individual or about large-scale efforts by the organization.

Identify the Adaptive Challenge. The leader must analyze and diagnose the problems they have identified and differentiate them as being technical or adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 1994).

Regulate Distress. Change is essential in addressing adaptive challenges, and that can cause stress. Creating a *holding environment* is a strategy to help the leader receive feedback to assess the stress level in followers. It is up to the leader in managing how fast change is implemented to ensure distress does not become an adoption impediment (Heifetz, 1994).

Maintain Disciplined Attention. The leader helps followers to focus on the hard work that needs to be accomplished, keeping people focused on the effort, rather than avoiding or disengaging with the challenge (Heifetz, 1994).

Give the Work Back to the People. When the leader provides the right level of guidance and structure to the work that needs to be done, people feel secure in what they are doing. If too much is given, it disempowers people and reduces their confidence in decision making. Too little guidance and a lack of support generate stress, and chaos ensues (Heifetz, 1994).

Protect Leadership Voices from Below. A leader needs to listen to all voices, including those voices from the socially outcast and the dissenters. It can be challenging to do this, because listening to nonconforming voices may disturb the social equilibrium (Heifetz, 1994; Northouse, 2016). These strategies for adaptive leadership provide valuable insight into how Cooperative Extension can approach the challenges associated with demands for evidence of public value.

Methods

The changing nature of public value was discovered as an emergent theme in a larger descriptive qualitative study on Cooperative Extension and 4-H's organizational environmental factors (Elliott-Engel, 2018). We asked what environmental factors Cooperative Extension administrators perceived as challenges for their organization and the 4-H program. We share state Extension directors' and 4-H program leaders' perspectives on the changing public value contract.

Participants

Twenty Cooperative Extension administrators [state Extension directors ($n = 7$) and state 4-H program leaders ($n = 13$)] volunteered to be interviewed as part of this IRB-approved study. All state 4-H program leaders and Extension directors were recruited through an e-mail and follow-up phone call to ensure a distributed representation. Participants represent 15 states and all four administrative regions of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU). The study population is small and has a public profile; therefore, some data have been disconnected to provide anonymity. The regions and administrator role by region are relayed in Table 1.

Pseudonyms were attributed to participants but have not been presented here to help protect the anonymity of the study participants who are a part of this high-profile and small population.

Table 1. Study Participants by APLU Region and Administrative Role

APLU Region	Administrative Role	Number
North Central	State Extension Directors	2
	State 4-H Program Leaders	3
Northeast	State Extension Directors	0
	State 4-H Program Leaders	4
Southern	State Extension Directors	3
	State 4-H Program Leaders	3
Western	State Extension Directors	2
	State 4-H Program Leaders	3
Totals	State Extension Directors	7
	State 4-H Program Leaders	13

Participant demographic information for the sample is provided in Table 2. Gender, age, race and ethnicity, years in the organization, and the role in the organization were collected.

Table 2. Participating Extension Administrator Demographic Information

Category	Options*	State Extension Director	State 4-H Program Leader	Total
Gender	Male	5	6	11
	Female	2	7	9
Age	18-29	0	0	0
	30-49	0	5	5
	50-64	5	7	12
	65+	2	1	3
Race/Ethnicity	White & Non-Hispanic	7	12	19
	Black	0	1	1
Years of Extension Employment	0-10	1	2	3
	11-20	2	7	9
	21-30	2	3	5
	31+	2	2	4
Highest Degree Level Earned	Bachelors	0	0	0
	Masters	0	1	1
	Doctorate	7	12	19
University Title Level#	Director	2	11	13
	Department Head	0	1	1
	Dean	4	1	5
	Chancellor	1	0	1

Note: *The demographics survey was all open-ended; the options relayed in this table represent the data after they were qualitatively coded into discrete categories. # Demographic survey results were coded into these respective categories. Assistant, associate, or vice prefixes were all coded into the broad categories of the role's title.

Data Collection

Participants completed a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threat (SWOT) analysis for both Cooperative Extension and the 4-H programs in their state. A SWOT analysis is a management assessment tool (Pickton & Wright, 1998). Participants were asked to complete the analysis as a mental exercise before the interview and then as a tool to reflect on what they identified. Data were collected through video-based interviews and ranged from 44 to 114 minutes long.

Data Analysis

Data were prepared and analyzed by transcribing audio recordings verbatim. During data collection and analysis, memoing occurred (Charmaz, 2014). Open-coding with Atlas.ti was conducted, and then themes were developed. Member checking was conducted to support transparency (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Transcripts were shared with the participants to ensure that they agreed with the meaning conveyed in the original transcripts. Initial themes were also provided back to the participants to seek feedback on the analysis. Triangulation was supported by using two separate populations (e.g., State 4-H program leaders and State Extension Directors) to give perspective on the same phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Open codes were separated between the two populations and compared; there were no thematic differences between the two populations, even though they had different roles and perspectives on the organization.

Reflexivity

The researcher is the human instrument; therefore, researchers are encouraged to be self-critical of their analytical process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We all have a life-long relationship with Cooperative Extension and the 4-H program. To account for the biases and influencing experiences, both the internal and external dialogue (Tobin & Begley, 2004), reflection occurred throughout the data analysis process. We used analytical memos and notes in the research journal to help expose our thinking and personal experiences to enhance reflexivity.

Results

Money is the primary enabling resource for the system. Nancy shared,

People realize that research costs money; you have to have labs and [you] need to have students, and you know it costs money. People just think that Extension just happens, that people just go out there and do [it]. [University] administrators don't quite know how to fund it, because they can't see how you do that. They just think a person goes out and does an educational event.

Participants identified a reduction of financial support as the most significant crisis for the Cooperative Extension system. The reduction in financial resources to the system was the number one factor identified as a crisis, was the open code with the greatest number of data associated with it. Additionally, a reduction of resources was identified as inevitable and cyclical. Carolyn, a Cooperative Extension director from a state that is currently in a strong financial position, stated, “I’m sure that if I stay in this job long enough, I’ll be in a position of [dealing with] a negative budget situation.” This statement was made in recognition of the ebb and flow of finances as well as a deep appreciation for her organization’s current level of resources.

William put it succinctly when discussing how decisions were made about how dollars were spent. He said, “We only have so many dollars.” Administrators relayed their concerns about reduced dollars in the system because this reduction directly affected the services and programming provided by Cooperative Extension. Reductions challenged the delivery of already existing programs, and further reductions of financial support would have prevented administrators from being able to actively engage their organization in new programming.

Practically speaking, downward pressure on funding has and continues to reduce the number of people to do the work. Cooperative Extension is based on people delivering direct education. Thus, the reduction in people (because of the budget funding) limits the ability to continue to deliver this local programming. Recognition of financial reduction as a crisis was relayed at the federal, state, and county levels and was influenced by different trends, impacts, and responses.

Federal Level of Support

Federal contributions to the budget came from legislatively granted and competitively awarded funding streams. The Smith-Lever Act Capacity Grant, which in the administrators’ vernacular was often referred to as “capacity funding,” was legislatively granted. As examples of federal competitively-awarded funding, administrators mentioned the Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR) Sustainable Community Projects, and the Tribal Extension Grant Program. Administrators identified capacity federal funding as the foundation for the funding partnership. Of the federal dollars available, Smith-Lever funding was considered to be most valuable. As Joseph stated,

I think the ultimate crisis for Extension in this country, not just here [in this state], will be the moment when the federal funds, if there was decision at that level, [are] not invested in Extension with Smith-Lever. I think if that were to ever happen, that would be a critical moment.

It would be a critical moment because Smith-Lever funds, even at flat funding levels (which translates to shrinking levels due to inflation), provided flexible base support that allowed for matching funding from the state, county, and grants.

Administrators relayed that Smith-Lever funds had been at flat funding levels. The consensus of administrators supported what Sam mused, “I don’t see any huge influx of new dollars.” Due to the essential nature of this funding source, William emphatically stated, “We need to be focused on developing capacity funding; that’s the message everyone should be having.” While administrators did not see the possibility of positive upward movement in Smith-Lever funds, it was the area they most wished would increase.

While the flat level of capacity funding was front and center for administrators, other trends stood out. Numerous administrators talked about the expanded opportunities to find federal funding partners across the government. There was mixed feedback about the availability of competitive grant dollars. Several talked about the “vast” opportunities for federal grant funding, and others lamented the shrinking availability of competitive dollars. This disparity was related to how they perceived their potential grant pool; for example, those who thought more broadly of federal partners saw the opportunities as wide open, while those who were looking for historic grants within USDA-NIFA saw shrinking possibilities.

State Level of Support

It will come as no surprise that administrators’ perspective on their respective state was based on the unique state’s economy, politics, and culture. For example, Sam relayed the context of his state by saying,

Basically, we’re an oil and gas state and the oil prices . . . are starting to climb back up, [but] nobody has that magic ball and [can] look at what’s going to be in the next five to six years. But most of the indicators [are] looking like we’ve been through the worst of the recession for [our state]; it’ll probably be steadier, slightly increased over the next number of years, based on the oil and gas revenue for the state.

In addition to the societal aspects of the state, every state’s model of funding is unique, as Callie said, Extension “[is] a hundred variations on a theme.” Each state’s funding expectations between state and county legislators are unique. At the state level, relationships of administrators to their state legislature are recognized as being incredibly important because of the significant financial contributions of the legislature. Nancy stated, “We engage [with] our legislature a lot because 42% of our funding comes from the legislature, [it’s] the way we fund our program.” Sam said, “The state legislature certainly has influence. Eighty percent of our budget comes from the [state legislature] in the [state], so [if] they have concerns or certain needs, that is something that we need to take very seriously.” The fear of losing financial support from the state was ever present. As noted by Sam, the legislature was also invested in Extension’s programming efforts, and therefore, relationships Cooperative Extension has with legislators are important to communicate what the Cooperative Extension program is doing.

Sam recognized that the conversation went in both directions. It is important to communicate outcomes but also to learn state legislators' interests. Regular contact with the legislature was viewed as a way to help monitor concerns and to attempt to grow financial support. Timothy shared, "I worry about . . . the trajectory of [state funding,], and part of what I'm trying to focus on is how we can have an impact on how our legislature thinks and how we can drum up support." He relayed that he is strategically working with the legislature to increase funding.

Carolyn said that to be successful in receiving money from the state legislature, she had to be "smart enough to not go to the state legislature and ask them for a type of position that they would never dream of funding. I need to be politically savvy enough to make a list of what I want the state legislature to fund." Clearly communicating the outcomes of Cooperative Extension and matching that with an understanding of the concerns of the state legislature was viewed as a successful strategy.

Most administrators shared that they had heard about the challenges that "other" states had experienced, resulting from the state's legislature slashing budgets. One Extension director was currently experiencing a budget cut. William lived in an energy-dependent state, and the organization experienced a significant financial reduction from the legislature. He shared that, even with relationships, the state budget was cut,

[The State Legislature] just cut; you know, it's a straight cut [across all agencies]. If you try to engage our state legislators in funding the program of Extension, in my case, they will automatically tell you that . . . "we give the University, we give the board of regents plenty of money. It's up to them to allocate it." So . . . I can line up a thousand of our clientele to testify on our behalf, but the answer will always come back . . . the same.

For well-resourced states, this was a problem they would like to avoid. One such Extension director, Timothy, said,

I'm trying to focus on how we can have an impact on how our legislature thinks and how we can drum up support . . . to be able to have a stronger future. A part of this involves the whole idea of capacity money versus competitive money. And, I think, on the research, you know, we've got obviously a lot of opportunities to bring in competitive money, but what people sometimes forget, especially on the ag side, is that capacity money, whether it's coming from the state or the federal government, is what's funding the faculty. It's funding those faculty positions. The competitive money allows you to bring in the graduate students and the postdocs and to be able to actually do all the extra things.

Timothy highlighted the important role that the legislature had on the future of Cooperative Extension. Relationships were critical for gaining support. Additionally, Timothy underscored the value of federal funding in relation to both state funding and the organization as a whole.

County Level of Support

Administrators recognized the constant shifting status of financial support from counties. As with states, each county had its own economy, culture, and politics. Multiplying each of those dynamics by the number of counties in each state suggests why relationships with county officials were noted as important and challenging.

Administrators emphasized that retaining funding at the county level was a constant battle. One state that had recently experienced a state-level financial decrease had reorganized their county-level field staff to have a person who was responsible for developing relationships with the county elected officials. Joseph spoke of the goal and the reasoning behind it when he said,

I see an opportunity to get more funds from the counties. Right now, the counties put in about \$6 to \$7 million a year. I truly believe that number could get to \$15 to \$20 million a year if we do it right because they'll see a need to . . . be more invested in what we do.

The administrator, in this case, was relying on relationships to expand the grassroots input to the budget. In his state, Joseph saw an opportunity at the county level. Other administrators had mixed perspectives on county funding. Some recognized that Cooperative Extension was a significant portion of county government budgets in rural counties. Others saw successes that had occurred in receiving funding from urban communities because Extension was a small expenditure. Carolyn relayed both contexts when she said, "In a small, rural county, Extension might be 15% of their budget; whereas if you look at [an] urban county, it's not even 1%." The difference in capacity contributed to the constantly shifting financial status of each county and the challenge that county funding provided for the system.

Change in Public Valuing of Public Higher Education

Throughout the discussions about funding from the federal-, state-, and county-level administrators, it was revealed that there was a change in how public services were valued. The administrators had experienced a downward shift of resources, and in many ways, they had accepted that the downward shift would continue. In response to the reduction of public financial support, they have turned toward a wide array of other funding streams such as competitive grants and contracts, fundraising, and fees.

The pressure on funding has coincided with a multi-decade reduction in public support for higher education. Joseph recognized the shift as "the shaking [up] of state budgets, the public's questioning of the value of higher education in many sectors of the country, has put pressure on the way we do things." The use of the term public in the administrator's comments referred to the state legislature's language, so it is a political discourse that has had real pressure on the reduction of budgets. Timothy framed it existentially when he said this:

There's just a lot of conversation about what the future's going to hold and whether or not we're going to have all the opportunities that we have now, going forward 10 or 20 or 50 or 100 years. I think that's the biggest piece I worry about. I think that within our organizations, we've got great people. We can make a lot of great decisions. We can move forward, but we heavily rely on the public to fund these institutions.

Timothy recognized the importance of public dollars, that they are shrinking, and that even organizational strategy development may not be enough to respond to that trend.

Importance of Evidence to Show Extension's Benefit

In recognition of the changing contract between legislatures and public service organizations through the shrinking number of public dollars available, it has always been thought that there is a need to communicate research impacts better. Nancy recognized the need for evaluation and for putting resources behind that initiative. She said,

We invested a number of years ago in program evaluators to really evaluate the work that we're doing and so that we can talk about . . . [how] our work makes a difference. This is what's happening from our work. I think that it's not enough just to tell people that, you know, a million [state residents] went to our programs, big deal. More people went to the state fair last year. So, what does that mean? So, you can't just say millions of people, but what were the outcomes [for] those millions of people?

Nancy elaborated that when they were able to communicate specific impacts and outcomes, then the legislature could be responsive. She also highlighted that the outcomes needed to be communicated widely to stakeholders so that those messages were communicated from multiple directions.

James talked about some 4-H specific measures that he saw as being important to support 4-H program messaging. He said,

In the last two years . . . I've worked with our specialists to do some large-scale research projects on [the impact of] Camp, the impact of volunteers, the impact of being a 4-H alumni. Some of those are in progress . . . [and] those are helping agents to get the bigger picture that . . . having evidence-based information about the impact of our programs is important.

The implications of a young person attending a 4-H camping experience or an adult serving as a 4-H volunteer for 30 years are not simple interpretations. Each of these programs is complex. Curt acknowledged this when he said,

The reality [is] you may not see the outcomes of our children's presence and engagement in our program for two or three decades. So, we do draw on common measures as

examples. We have a research and evaluation focused group that I've put together [to focus on] demonstrating . . . short-term outputs that then we're able to demonstrate by [using] logic models [of] how that leads theoretically into longer-term outcomes and then . . . to the impacts. And so, I believe [in] being very deliberate. Too often, we say, 'Oh my gosh, we may not know that for 20 years.' Well, we have to start now and try to track some of those young people over the course of a 10- to 20-year trajectory. So, you just have to start.

The need for evaluation was emphasized due to its connection to financial support. Because Extension is a research-based program, those financial strings are causing researchers to focus on the bigger research questions of program outputs, as shown by the above quotes.

Greater Emphasis on Grants and Contracts

For administrators to locate additional resources other than public support, they have relied heavily on the use of grants and contracts, often referred to as soft dollars. Administrators recognized the use of soft dollars as the new normal and as necessary. The use of grants posed a challenge for administrators and Cooperative Extension to remain focused on the organization's mission. Grants are term-limited, thereby creating a discontinuity of service in communities.

Mary shared a common sentiment that "the grant money [is] out there; there are . . . always opportunities to apply for more grants." David shared that the use of grants is "something that's going to be necessary. We have to have the capacity within our programs for looking at competitive funds. No question." Grants were viewed as an imperfect but almost sure way to increase the financial resources of the organization at both the state-administrative and county-programmatic levels. However, administrators did not view grants as faultless, as Rhonda said,

Competitive funding tends to be individually focused. Someone [must] serve as a principal investigator; you know, that someone is usually a faculty member who is currently evaluated based on their personal portfolio and not necessarily [on] their ability to work with others.

Rhonda also communicated evaluation of final grant outputs and the size of the grant are different than the purpose of the work or the effectiveness of the work. Sam shared an anecdote about an on-campus 100% appointment Extension specialist in his state who had a multimillion-dollar grant to study an animal that did not live in the state. Even as administrators discussed the emphasis of grant funding, they were sincere in their desire to only seek funding opportunities that would help support the mission of their local Extension systems. However, they recognized that even when the money was directed toward the mission, there were still shortcomings with grant funding.

Grants, by definition, are term-limited. The use of grants creates challenges to delivering long-term community-responsive programming. Curt shared that because the funding for the state 4-H program was level due to how the state public funding was organized,

[At] this university, you cannot have permanent positions that are on soft dollars, so the only way for us to grow is by drawing on grants and gifts and those types of things. But regrettably, [that] doesn't create a sustained position for people to feel like they have a career trajectory. They, therefore, come in, they'll build something up and are very successful, and within 12 months, they leave because they're going to a job that has permanent funding and some benefits with it.

In this case, the use of grants was not the only limiting factor, as the university policy of not allowing permanent positions to be funded by soft dollars also hindered the effectiveness of the grant funding. However, in this example, the overarching argument was that the short-term nature of the funding source contributed to inconsistency in staffing, and in turn, programming. David shared another example of a grant serving at-risk youth in rural and urban communities. He said,

The challenge on that one is the funding has now been reduced significantly for 4-H . . . across the country . . . creating a lot of anxiety and stress and disappointment. Despite the funding reduction, we are working on capturing the impact of what's been going on so that we can reposition it to other funding sources.

The termination of the grant causes the work to either terminate or change. Either way, the service to the end-user is interrupted. The change in work, in this case, was the shift toward evaluation and fund development. David also emphasized the stress that it causes to have to keep finding new and different forms of funding to keep a project going. If the project is not able to be funded, regardless of the impact that the program was able to deliver, it is discontinued, and staff move on to the next project.

Fees for Service

In addition to utilizing soft money, the reduction in public dollars has required administrators to seek other strategies to provide programming. The use of fees for programming has been an active strategy, one that has generated financial support for program implementation. Particularly 4-H memberships have served as a model for the use of fees. Elizabeth described the situation in her state, she said,

A base . . . model is they provide the salary, and then we're expected to generate income. So, I [the state 4-H program leader] put an overhead cost on all the programs that we deliver here at the state level, and it gives us excess money to provide for the administrative assistants to do some of the initiatives that we want to do.

Elizabeth's comment relays the logic that fees allow for budget capacity to be able to do the programmatic work. Despite the ability of fees to generate additional resources, administrators discussed their practical limitations. Susan said,

Historically . . . counties provided facilities [e.g.] space; counties provided the admin[istrative assistant] and the staff member that sat in the county. Over time, that has eroded in 4-H. The majority of the staff are funded through [the] program fees that we charge 4-H members in the community program. There are state lines, and the division is trying to pull the program staff off the state lines and move them all onto program fees. But I'm telling [the state director's team] that the budget can't sustain and support that. It costs \$54 to enroll in 4-H this year, and the projections for staff merits and benefits will [make it] go up to \$62 over the next eight years.

Susan further explained that because 4-H was able to generate money, there has been a financial shift of resources slowly and gradually away from 4-H to underwrite other Extension programs. The ability to generate resources ensured resources for the program holistically. However, it was cautioned that the increase in fees might serve as a barrier to membership or long-term program sustainability.

Stakeholder Experience of Cooperative Extension

When administrators reported successes in increasing support, the outcome was predicated on those individuals first having established a positive and trusting relationship with funders. The work of an administrator, first and foremost, according to Ryan, is "reaching out to businesses and stakeholders to develop stronger partnerships." Robert shared that he was "collaborating with other youth organizations and collaborating with those corporations and . . . that might have some funding opportunities and assistance opportunities."

Positive ties arose in part because public officials and corporate donors had first-hand understanding and experience with Cooperative Extension programs. Administrators reported they could increase the likelihood that stakeholders would develop open and trusting relationships with possible supporters. Carolyn stated,

I think the tradition in [State] of, we have a really long and strong tradition of a strong 4-H program. I think today, if you will go to the state legislature, you would see a lot of them grew up in 4-H, and now, they are movers and shakers, and because of their experience with 4-H, they support 4-H [and Extension].

Stakeholders who were program alumni were more likely to see Cooperative Extension as valuable and necessary. Thus, individuals who knew of the organization and had personally participated in one or more of its programs were more likely to provide support for it.

Administrators relayed that they saw their explicit bias for Cooperative Extension was discounted by stakeholders. Administrators shared that if they had one of their clients talk to their legislature, that was more effective than when they talked to them alone. Nancy captured this sentiment well when she said,

[We also want to make] sure that our supporters are good advocates. . . . Your advocates have to be able to say why is it important—this time more likely to graduate from high school [or] two times as likely to pick a science career and go to college. Those are issues legislators want to hear. 4-Hers are twice as likely to actually come back to [state] [or] are more likely to stay in [state] . . . because they feel this sense of belonging and being part of the economy. And so, you have to really be able to talk about that. Tell that story, tell it yourself, you know, the legislators want to hear it from me, but they also want to hear from other people. So, I think you have to prepare your community supporters to do those kinds of things to be able . . . to avert a crisis.

It was also highlighted that when a client was able to communicate the impact of the program to stakeholders, that was perceived as being very effective for ensuring legislator support of Cooperative Extension.

Having positive support was not a panacea. William lived in a state that was experiencing a recession; he shared, “I can line up a thousand of our clientele to testify on our behalf, but the answer will always come back to me the same.” William put a fine point on the challenge that when the resources are not available, no matter the strength of the relationship, there may be no more resources to be invested.

Discussion

As administrators discussed funding from the federal-, state-, and county-level administrators, it revealed a change in how public services were valued (Franz, 2013). The administrators had experienced a downward shift in resources and increased competition for funds (Graf, 1993; Kalambokidis, 2011). They had accepted that the downward shift would continue and had internalized responses to the neoliberal societal framework by emphasizing evaluation and recognizing the need for communicating public value. In response to this reduction of public financial support, they turned toward a wide array of other funding streams such as competitive grants and contracts, fundraising, sponsorship, and fees.

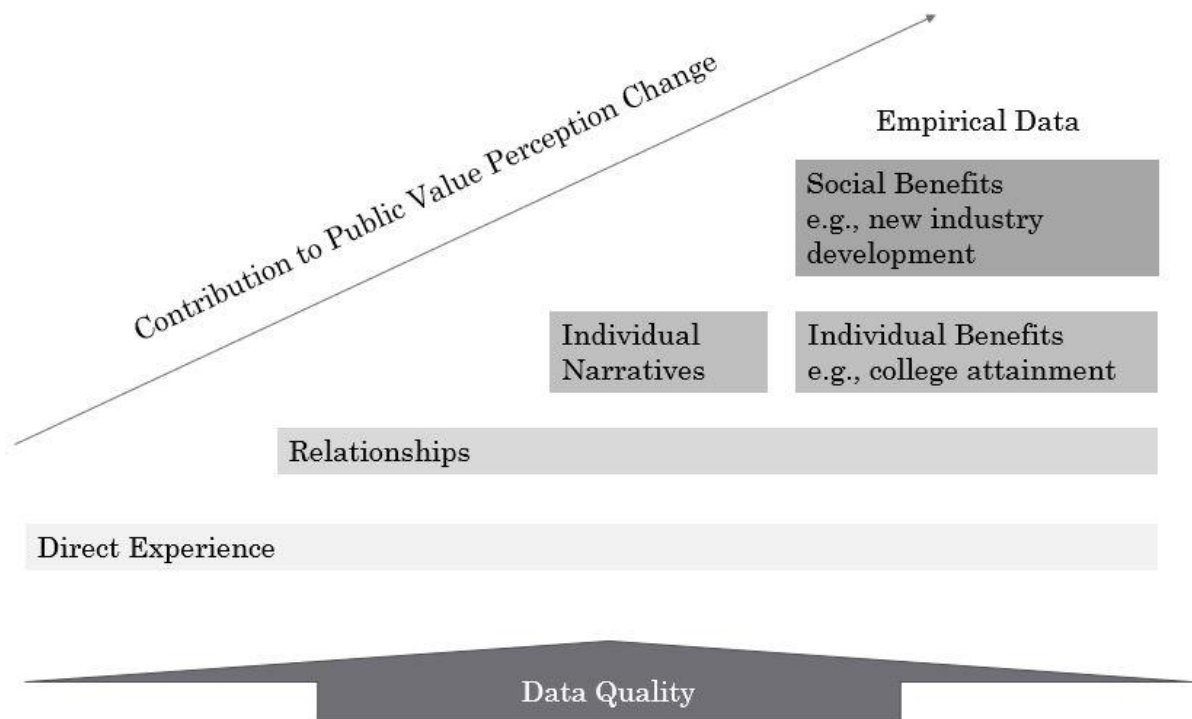
Administrators recognized a societal shift in how the public valued Cooperative Extension and felt it was undervalued through the downward pressure on public funding. The need for evaluation was emphasized due to its connection to financial support. Because Cooperative Extension is a research-based program, financial pressures may cause researchers to focus on larger research questions of program outputs. Administrators are starting to seek systematic

information that may be challenging to obtain, e.g., long-term longitudinal data about program outcomes.

Administrators framed their requests for public support in light of community needs and the Extension system’s capacity to respond to them. This narrative and relational approach was different than Franz (2013), who espoused the reliance of data to convey impact. Use of narrative and relationships to convey impact values may be a response to different forces than previously understood.

Figure 1 displays the elements stakeholders recognized within the technical challenges of reduced funding. Managing relationships was important for Cooperative Extension. Each contribution to public-value perception change magnified the next level on the scale. Each form of data can be used effectively to convey impact, yet when an individual has personal experience and has strong relationships with Cooperative Extension, and the system is armed with public good, the impacts that are rigorously derived supports a compelling argument that increases financial support for Cooperative Extension.

Figure 1. Contributory Power of Supporting Data to Change Perception of Extension’s Public Value



Neither relationships nor data alone are going to change the financial outlook of the Cooperative Extension organization. It is when multiple supporting contributions are coordinated together that a change in stakeholder support of Cooperative Extension as a public value could occur.

Relationships between individuals and organizations were important, but data are also important. Individual narratives provide single points of data and can be poignant cases. The stakeholder's personal experience was powerful for an individual to understand the effectiveness of cooperative Extension or the 4-H program. Yet, stakeholders may only be able to recognize the organization's potential in their context. Empirical evaluation results inform the other points of impact data and can help expand understanding of the organization's efforts by stakeholders.

Additionally, administrators recognized who delivered the public value message was important. As administrators of the organization, they were expected by funders and stakeholders to communicate in their self-interest by requesting funding. This expectation for effective communication is accurate and expected; leaders of an organization should advocate for their organization. In a crowded public-serving sector, funders and legislators recognize this bias and discount the messages. Clients that can speak to the value of the program by relaying evaluation-based impacts become essential and valuable communicators. Therefore, the use of informed clients will be essential for building stakeholder and funder support, even with excellent program impacts.

Administrators, as adaptive leaders, have managed the organizational response to the societal shifts of neoliberalism and shrinking support for public funding (Kalambokidis, 2014). While Cooperative Extension administrators have been responding to the stress of shrinking budgets, it takes time away from the work that needs to be done to respond to larger social forces. Changes were forced by an existential need to be responsive to shifts in financial influences. Their adaptive responsibility is now to raise awareness by their clients and stakeholders of the changed understanding of public value because it is essential to ensure sustained public financial funding.

Recommendations and Implications

The public contract between citizen, legislature, and public-serving organizations has changed. The contract reflects the notion of the value of the service received in relation to the dollar invested. Stakeholders are asking, what is the return on investment? And, why should the public dollar be invested in this program compared to any other given program? Yet, what the experiences of Cooperative Extension administrators shows is the systems' success in communicating impact can use stakeholder personal experience, relationships, and personal narrative with data-driven return on investment to increase legislative financial support.

There is no longer a commitment to funding based solely on relationships or historical connections; administrators understand this proposition. The organization must identify strategies to communicate public value contribution successes to their clients and their legislators. In messaging, it is important to note the public good is not valued in neoliberalism, while the return on investment is. Even the approach to communicating the value of the public good may need to be limited solely to the impacts on youth, families, communities, and the economy.

The emphasis on empirical evidence is both a threat and a significant strength. If Cooperative Extension can generate research-based outcomes that demonstrate that return on investment is valuable, then there is room to change the budget trajectory. This shift has expanded pressure on proof of outcomes, which has been realized through an emphasis on evaluation, as was acknowledged in the literature (Franz et al., 2014; Franz & Archibald, 2018; Kalambokidis, 2014). Cooperative Extension and 4-H's relationship to research capacity within the university can help make Extension highly competitive in this environment. The administrators recognized this should be the case, as they strive to establish their programs to conduct significant and impactful research.

For the adaptive leaders of Cooperative Extension to address the perception of legislators as a public value, both a relationship and data-driven response will be needed to increase capacity funds, which allow a continuation of delivering public impact. Who delivers the message to stakeholders is the next area of exploration for advancing the Extension system? Who delivers the message may be even more important for effectively changing the funding landscape for Cooperative Extension? Further reflection and evaluation of messaging and results from Extension system legislative requests would inform strategy for the system.

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