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ORAL PRESENTATIONS

Shifts in Funding of Public Value for Higher-Education Engagement: Extension Administrator Perspective

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Abstract

The dominant narrative communicated in the literature is that in order to improve Extension's public support, Extension needs to measure impacts and more effectively communicate value to stakeholders (Kalambokidis, 2011; West, Drake, & Londo, 2009). Improving evaluation efforts have been aimed at supporting the narratives shared with legislators to increase public funding (Conone, 1991; Cummings & Boleman, 2006; Fetsch & Bolen, 1989; Graf, 1993; Franz, 2013). The promise of this narrative is that if Extension does a better job of documenting and communicating the economic and public impact of Extension programs then more financial resources will be appropriated (Davis, 2012; Franz, 2013; Stup, 2003; Zotz, 2004). In order to build support for Extension, "public value stories and statements" (Chazdon & Paine, 2014) or "public good" (Franz, 2015) are terminologies that have been used synonymously with "impact." This is a movement occurring across the not-for-profit sector. The United States is experiencing a societal change that has removed the contract of public support for public services. The trend reflects a strengthening of neoliberalism in the political discourse in the United States. Neoliberalism is commonly referred to as an economic theory. Yet, it is comprised of values, ideologies, and practices that work as a "cultural field." Giroux (2004) makes 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 increasingly undercut (Giroux, 2004). The changing nature of public value was discovered as an emergent theme as a part of a larger descriptive qualitative study on Extension and 4-H's organizational environmental factors. The research question of the larger study was: What environmental factors do Extension administrators perceive as being challenges for their Extension organization and the 4-H program? The objective of this project is to share State Extension Directors and 4-H Program Leaders perspectives on the changing public value contract. Twenty Extension administrators (State Extension Directors (n=7), State 4-H Program Leaders (n=13)) volunteered to be interviewed. Participants represent 15 states and all four APLU administrative regions. Participants completed a SWOT Analysis for both Extension and the 4-H program in their state. A SWOT Analysis is a management assessment tool (Pickton & Wright, 1998). Data were prepared and analyzed by transcribing audio recordings verbatim. During data collection and analysis memoing occurred. Open-coding with Atlas.ti was conducted and then themes were developed (Charmaz, 2014). Member checking was conducted to support transparency (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Triangulation was supported

by using two separate populations to give perspective on the same phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Administrators have experienced the downward shift of resources and have accepted that the downward shift will continue from government funding sources. In response they have turned toward a wide array of other funding streams: competitive grants and contracts, fundraising, and fees. Administrators confirmed that Extension and 4-H need to communicate research impacts better to sure up public funding. Administrators recognized the need for evaluation and for putting resources behind evaluation efforts. They relayed that when they were able to communicate *specific* impacts and outcomes, then the legislature can be positively responsive. Administrators highlight that the outcomes need to be communicated by stakeholders, so that those messages are being communicated from multiple directions to legislators. 4-H specifically discussed measures that were important to support 4-H program messaging. An emphasis was placed on conducting large scale research projects. For example, on the impact of camp, the impact of volunteers, the impact of being a 4-H alumni. However, these studies are complex and they take time to complete. Particularly with 4-H many impacts were recognized as occurring many years after the program was completed, and there was excitement about starting to implement studies that would generate those results even if they wouldn't reap rewards for decades. When funding increase successes were discussed, having relevant impacts were important. However, strong and consistent relationships were also vital. The emphasis on empirical evidence is both a threat and a significant strength. If Extension is able to generate research-based outcomes that support a viable return on investment then there is room to change the budget trajectory. The need for evaluation is emphasized due to its connection to financial strings. However, those financial strings are causing researchers to focus on the bigger research questions of program outputs. Extension and 4-H's relationship to research capacity within the university should help make Extension highly competitive in this environment. The administrators recognized that should be the case, and they were striving to set their own programs up to conduct significant and impactful research.

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