

Change Is Inevitable: How Field Specialist Positions Can Help Meet the Challenge

Abstract

After nearly 100 years, Extension has achieved a great deal. However, shrinking budgets from our traditional funders require us to think of new ways to address the needs of tomorrow and target programs that demonstrate impact and outcomes today. The field specialist model enables Extension to better address specific critical issues, leverage talent and resources, and develop collaborative partnerships that foster non-traditional funding opportunities while complementing the work of the county-based educator. The field specialist position may very well be the driving force in the 21st century Extension model.

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Introduction

Extension has provided outreach and education that has strengthened lives and communities across the country for nearly 100 years. However, regardless of historical achievements, the long-term sustainability of the traditional Extension system is currently being challenged by continued "flat" budgets and an ever-increasing list of critical issues. Now is the time to reconsider how we fund and focus our staffing resources to meet the needs of today's citizens and target programs that demonstrate impact and outcomes. Now is the time to consider adding a new type of Extension professional to the system. Now is the time for the "field specialist."

The field specialist position can target specific critical issues, leverage talent and resources, and develop collaborative partnerships that foster non-traditional funding opportunities. The position is also designed to complement the work of the county-based educator.

Position Overview

Ohio's field specialist positions are designed to be entrepreneurial in nature. Specialists have the opportunity and expectation to be leaders and innovators in developing new or revitalizing aging programming. According to the job description, the position "functions as a consultant with clientele to address statewide issues as expertise is needed." Field specialists, as consultants, develop vision statements and a scope of work or plan that serve as a road map.

In 2012, OSU Extension created 14 field specialist positions within Extension's four program areas to address the critical statewide issues identified in Table 1.

Table 1.
Specialization by Program Area

Community Development	Agriculture and Natural Resources	Family and Consumer Sciences	4-H
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Energy Development • Community Economics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agricultural and Resource Law • Agronomic Systems • Manure Management • Dairy Production • Taxation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food Safety • Food Nutrition and Wellness • Family Wellness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteerism and 4-H Community Clubs

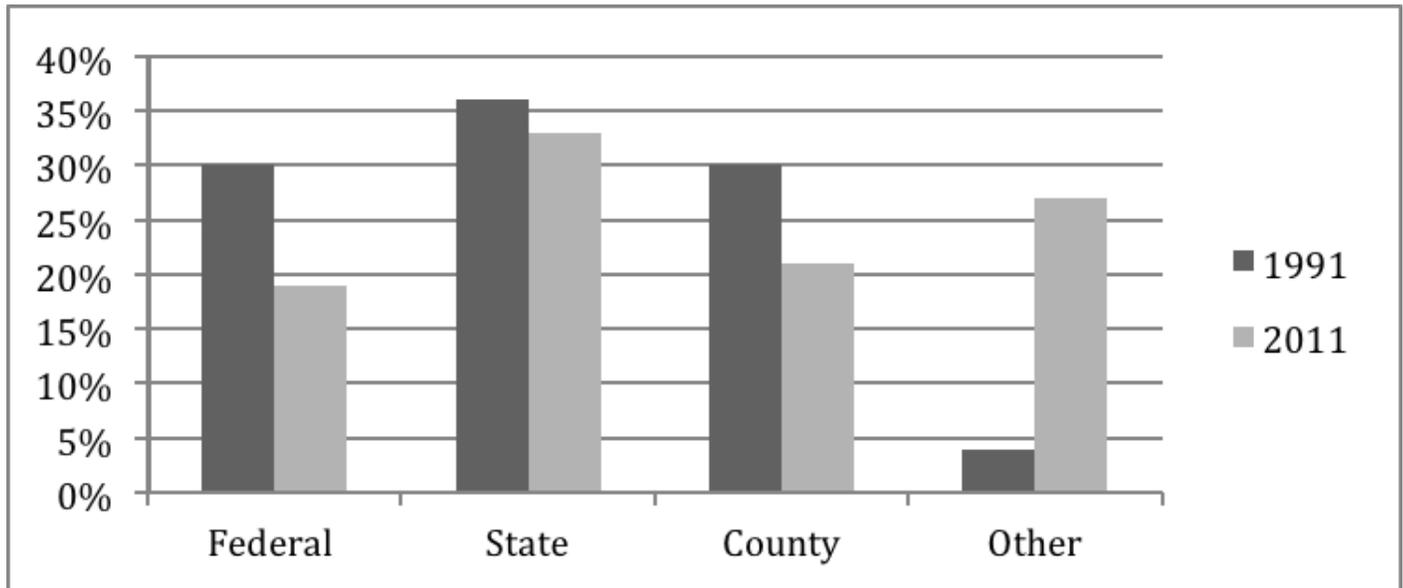
Drivers Challenging the Traditional Extension System

Bruce McPheron, new dean of Ohio State University's College of Food, Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, understands the importance of the Extension system and that change is inevitable. What Extension brings to the table, McPheron said at the November 28, 2012 Ohio Farm Bureau Federation annual meeting, is a local presence and understanding of the context of problems and questions, something a Google search can't provide.

As field specialists, we contend there are two key drivers leading the need for change.

1. *Funding Sources:* Historically, Extension has been supported almost exclusively by federal, state and county funding. Within the past two decades, there has been a major shift in the composition of funding at many of the nations' land-grant institutions to include non-governmental or 'other' sources of funding. Ohio State is a good example of this shift, as illustrated in Figure 1. In the 20-year time span between 1991-2011, federal, state and county funding has steadily decreased, while funding from other sources increased dramatically; from only 4% in 1991 to 27% in 2011 (OSU Extension Annual Reports, 1991 and 2011). Almost half of 'other' funding is received from grants and contracts, and another quarter from Extension program revenue. We anticipate that other funding revenues will continue to increase at OSU and other land-grant universities on a similar trajectory well into the future.

Figure 1.
Composition in OSU Extension Funding Sources (1991-2011)



2. *Technological Advances*: Technology is changing the way we do business. Extension clientele have easy access to almost unlimited information using the Internet, more information than "all of the Extension Educators put together", according to McPheron. However, the application of research based information remains a vital aspect in how Extension helps clientele with local and statewide issues. "We need to embrace technology where technology helps us" McPheron said. "If we don't change, someone will ask the question 'what is Extension?' and the answer will be 'there's an app for that.'" Extension must stay abreast or ahead of the curve or become irrelevant (McPheron's comments on the evolution of Extension were made during the opening luncheon of the Ohio Farm Bureau's annual meeting on November 28, 2012).

Meeting the Challenge

Field specialists are addressing the change drivers above. These new positions are meeting the challenge in the following ways.

Developing New Funding Opportunities

Generating new dollars to support critical programming is an opportunity to build partnerships and support Extension programming. As field specialists, we are required to generate revenue for professional development and travel expenses. The need to generate revenue further motivates us to build relationships with public and private partners who have an interest in sponsoring Extension programs. We become focused on seeking out synergistic opportunities for both the delivery of programming and leveraging of funding to support focused research and teaching efforts. With the latitude and motivation to explore varied partnerships, we are leveraging new resources, including state and federal funds targeted for regional or state-level programs, to meet client needs. The result is the development of funding reserves to help move research forward on critical statewide community economic development issues.

Building Critical Mass

As field specialists, we have the unique opportunity to develop a critical mass of new ideas and the ability to

get more done to meet broad issues or carry out major programming efforts. We are expected to develop collaborative partnerships with key organizations to address critical statewide issues. As a new position within Extension, a priority is to collaborate with county-based educators to conduct educational programs as a working team. Partnering with county-based Educators builds trust and facilitates learning about programs and projects we can offer to enhance what they are already doing in their counties. When effective teams are developed, educators can be directly involved in creating educational materials and curriculum, and accessing professional development opportunities. There is more emphasis on goal setting and reporting of team activities (versus compilation of individual activities), including outcomes, impacts, and documenting clientele's behavioral changes. (Bitsch & Thornsbury, 2010).

Expanding Geographic Focus

We are housed on regional campuses throughout the state, freeing us from local administrative responsibilities found at many county offices. Because we have statewide responsibilities, there is the opportunity to strengthen existing partnerships and explore new linkages within a broader geographic area on large-scale issues that have meaningful impact. As we tackle an expanded geographic area, we rely more on project referrals from Extension professionals and external clients, concentrating a larger portion of our efforts on outreach. We work together to develop and deliver marketing material to potential clientele, in order to "get the word out" about what we are doing as field specialists.

Targeting Statewide Issues and Beyond

Focusing collaborative efforts on critical statewide issues amasses the resources needed to effectively address these issues, which also elevates Extension's relevance. Field specialists concentrate efforts in the targeted specialization areas previously listed in Table 1. We develop curriculum and specific programming to meet clientele needs that demonstrate impact within our designated specialization areas. For example, Extension educators in specialized positions have come together to address the issue of water quality in Minnesota (McNeil, Jirik, Courneya, & Rugg, 2012). In Ohio, we have targeted energy, business retention and expansion, and other programs to address community economics and growth issues.

Multi-State Collaboration

Extension educators have a long history of collaborating to gather, share, and produce new educational materials. As critical societal issues continue to multiply, Extension systems struggle to react due to dwindling resources. Extension field specialists focus on critical issues that often transcend geographic boundaries, which positions them as a natural team leader to advance multi-state projects. For example, in Ohio both energy and community development field specialists have leveraged funding to establish multi-state working relationships to address critical issues impacting rural communities across the country.

Conclusion

Extension has a rich history. After nearly 100 years of effective county-based education, challenges to this system require us to re-think how we allocate staffing resources to address critical needs efficiently and effectively. According to McNeill, Jirik, Courneya, and Rugg (2012), Extension leadership must continue to look at the relevance of Extension programming to meet the needs of today's citizens and target programs that demonstrate impact and outcomes. We need positions that can complement the work of the county-based educator in targeting critical issues, leveraging talent and resources, and developing collaborative partnerships that foster non-traditional funding opportunities. Now is the time to consider the appropriate

balance of traditional county-based professionals and field-based specialists.

References

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