

What the Public Thinks of Extension

**A staff member's view may not accurately reflect
the impression that clientele have of the Service**

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As a public agency, the Cooperative Extension Service has made certain impressions on the people who have come in contact with it. While each of us may have an opinion as to what these views may be, our own background, experience, and involvement may lead us to false conclusions. For example, evidence from statements by various persons and perception studies indicate differences of opinion as to what Extension is and should be.

Work at the National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study has attempted to add some clarification to this problem from two standpoints. First, through graduate research a number of perception studies have been conducted with specific clientele groups. Additional studies are underway. Secondly, during 1961-62 the Center sponsored two series of seminars designed to furnish additional insight into this topic. The theme for the first series was "Changing Dimensions in Agriculture and Home Economics and Their Impact on Extension Administration." Papers presented in this series are published (see book reviews in this issue). Eight papers presented during the second series dealt specifically with the image of Cooperative Extension and its implication for extension administration.¹ Speakers presented a variety of views

¹ H. J. Boone and C. M. Ferguson (eds.), *An Image of Cooperative Extension* (Burlington: National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study, 1963).

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and relationships to Extension² (published in 1963 by the Center).

While a few of the speakers professed to speak only for themselves, most of them consulted others within "their public" in order to present a more representative viewpoint. This article summarizes points of view from seminar presentations and the perception studies completed to date. Each seminar presentation and each perception study presented some points that have been unique. However, a number of common threads showed up consistently. These are discussed under seven major summary statements.

The Cooperative Agricultural Extension Service has made a significant and lasting contribution to the growth and development of both agriculture and rural people.

This was emphasized by each seminar speaker, including those who are now somewhat critical of the organization. They pointed out that a great share of the credit for our present high standard of living is due to the phenomenal job the American farmer has done in releasing workers from the task of producing food.

Extension must continue to make changes, both in its organizational structure and its programs, in order to adjust to the rapidly changing conditions of society.

Almost without exception seminar speakers placed greater stress upon this point than on any other.

Extension's various publics are not in complete agreement as toward what image the organization should be striving.

To anyone familiar with the phenomenon of perception, this is not surprising. A close relationship existed between the areas of interest of clientele groups and what they feel the organization should represent. Clientele involved in the perception studies indicated less need for departing appreciably from present general patterns than was implied by seminar speakers. Differences emphasize the importance of discovering the bases by which different publics evaluate Extension.

Evidence indicates we have assumed that people know far more about the Extension Service than they actually do.

² Those participating in this series included: Dr. D. W. Colvard, President, Mississippi State University; Dr. Fred H. Harrington, now President, University of Wisconsin; Harold Florea, Editorial Director, Watt Publishing Co.; Larry Osman, Farm Writer, Milwaukee Journal; Charles B. Shuman, President, American Farm Bureau Federation; Milo Swanton, Executive Secretary, Wisconsin Council of Agricultural Cooperatives; C. A. Vines, Director of Extension, Arkansas; and E. L. Peterson, Executive Vice President, Milk Industry Foundation.

Studies of program planning committee members in Montana,³ formula feed operators in Kansas,⁴ selected agricultural business concerns in Wisconsin,⁵ and commercial fertilizer manufacturer and distributor representatives in Arizona,⁶ show great diversity and considerable misinformation among respondents concerning Extension's organizational affiliation. See Table 1.

Table 1. Perception of Extension's organizational affiliation

State in which study was conducted	Perceptions of affiliations by per cent of respondents			
	Land Grant institution	USDA	County government	State dept. of agriculture
Montana ³	95	76	55	58
Kansas ⁴	48	45	32	53
Wisconsin ⁵	51	40	51	77
Arizona ⁶	88	59	9	15

³ J. I. Moore, "Montana County Extension Program Planning Committee Members' Perception of the Cooperative Extension Service" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1962).

⁴ W. Griffith, "Formula Feed Operators' Perception of the Kansas Agricultural Extension Service" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1962).

⁵ E. Rynearson, "Understanding and Utilization of the Cooperative Extension Service Program in Columbia County, Wisconsin, by Selected Agri-Business Concerns" (unpublished M.S. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1961).

⁶ R. Amburgey, "Commercial Fertilizer Manufacturer and Distributor Representatives' Perception of the Arizona Cooperative Extension Service" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1962).

Kyd found a rather poor understanding of the entire field of adult education among Missouri legislators.⁷ His respondents tended to view adult education as night classes and organized courses concerned particularly with hobbies. Of the 124 legislators interviewed only seven demonstrated an understanding of Cooperative Extension's role in adult education.

⁷ J. I. Moore, "Montana County Extension Program Planning Committee Members' Perception of the Cooperative Extension Service" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1962).

⁸ W. Griffith, "Formula Feed Operators' Perception of the Kansas Agricultural Extension Service" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1962).

⁹ E. Rynearson, "Understanding and Utilization of the Cooperative Extension Service Program in Columbia County, Wisconsin, by Selected Agri-Business Concerns" (unpublished M.S. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1961).

¹⁰ R. Amburgey, "Commercial Fertilizer Manufacturer and Distributor Representatives' Perception of the Arizona Cooperative Extension Service" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1962).

¹¹ K. Kyd, "Extension Administration and State Legislative Process—A Case Study of the 71st Missouri General Assembly" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1962).

There is lack of agreement as to what Extension's objectives and functions should be, the types of programs it should offer, and the clientele it should serve.

Objectives and Functions Several speakers implied that Extension lacks clearly defined organizational objectives. President Colvard said: "The big challenge for Extension administrators, it seems to me, is to provide the clearest possible statement of objectives for their programs consistent with the needs of society of today." Research findings in the area of Extension objectives are limited. Studies previously referred to, plus those by Lawson,⁸ Biever,⁹ Dehnert,¹⁰ Quinn,¹¹ and Beavers,¹² were concerned with specific rather than broad objectives and functions. These studies indicate a continued focus on youth development and the dissemination of technology in agriculture and home economics.

"Providing information on specific farm and home problems" was ranked as the principal function of Extension by Montana, Kansas, California, and Wisconsin respondents. "Teaching principles of farming" was rated second. "Providing information and leadership for community services and activities" and "consulting in the analysis and management of the total farm and home" tied for third and fourth ratings. There was less agreement in these studies on what specific activities were considered appropriate than was the case with objectives (see Table 2).

Programs and Program Areas There is a great variation as to how inclusive Extension's programs should be, but general agreement that its programs must stem from a broader base than production technology.

Of the program areas contained in the *Scope Report*, perhaps the most controversial one is "public affairs and policy." Reaction to Extension's responsibility in this area was sharply divided among the seminar speakers, ranging from a serious concern on the

⁸ Winferd M. Lawson, "Commercial Cotton Farm Operators' Perception of the California Agricultural Extension Service" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1959).

⁹ Lawrence Biever, "Roles of County Extension Agents As Perceived by County Agricultural Committee Members in Wisconsin" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1957).

¹⁰ George E. Dehnert, "Agricultural Committee Members' Understanding and Knowledge of Their Duties and Responsibilities" (unpublished M.S. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1961).

¹¹ Emily Quinn, "Home Economics Project Leaders' Perception of Extension" (unpublished M.S. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1962).

¹² Irene Beavers, "Iowa County Extension Committee Members' and Agents' Perception of Program Planning" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1962).

Table 2. Relative rank of county Extension agents' activities

Description of Extension activities	Rank order by states			
	Montana	Kansas	California	Arizona*
Obtaining information directly from consumers	1	1	1	1
Training local leaders	3	2	4	8
Organizing and coordinating county and USDA programs with county	4	3	2	2
Working and consulting with club groups	5	5	3	5
Home relations activities	6	6	5	11
Program planning	2	4	Not reported	4

*More than six activities were used.

...of the Farm Bureau to complete endorsement by a member of the farm press. In the perception studies, feed operators, program planning committee members, home economics project leaders, fertilizer representatives, and agricultural business concerns indicated that this area should receive low priority (see Table 3). However, commercial cotton farmers interviewed by Lawson felt it should receive more emphasis.

...might be expected from the background of the seminar speakers, there were few direct references to home economics. References were viewed the program almost completely as a club program or

Table 3. Rank order of relative emphasis to be given selected program areas

Area of program emphasis	Rank order of emphasis by states			
	Montana	Kansas	Arizona	Wisconsin*
Club development and 4-H	1	2	6	High
Efficiency in agricultural production	2	1	1	High
Leadership development	3	4	7	High
Conservation of natural resources	4	3	3	High
Marketing	5	6	4	Not reported
Manpower and resource development	6	7	8	Low
County living	7	9	9	Low
Home affairs	8	8	5	Low
Management on farm and home	9	5	2	High

*Grouped only as "high" and "low" agreement.

as a way of occupying leisure time. You will note in Table 3 that compared to other areas, respondents placed a low priority on family living as a program area.

Several speakers referred to Extension's responsibility in helping clarify the public's image of agriculture. Program planning committee members in Montana considered improving urban understanding of agriculture a high priority among Extension activities. Reference was also made by speakers to the increasing importance of Extension's leadership role, particularly with respect to other organizations and agencies. Also, findings summarized in Table 2 give leader training a relatively high priority.

Studies completed to date are inconclusive regarding changes that Extension should attempt in program emphasis. California cotton producers felt that marketing should receive much more emphasis. However, Kansas feed operators and Montana program planning committee members exhibited only moderate interest in this area. Arizona fertilizer representatives placed high priority on management in the farm and home.

Clientele Reaction to Extension's responsibility to urban groups has been extremely varied. On one hand, there is a feeling that Extension discharges its responsibility to the general public through service to agriculture alone. Another group interprets the Smith-Lever Act to imply that we should serve all people regardless of their place of residence. Others feel that we should confine the bulk of our effort to serving full-time, commercial farmers.

The groups studied in Montana, Kansas, Arizona, and Wisconsin considered the family on the average-size farm Extension's most important clientele. Beyond this, as indicated in Table 4, agreement on clientele group priorities was somewhat lower.

There is divided opinion on the legitimacy of Extension working with and serving the "agri-business" segment of agriculture. One speaker implied that Extension should consider making charges for individual and specialized work with firms. An overwhelming majority of the cotton farmers in Lawson's study favored Extension working with this group. In Kansas and Arizona, respondents placed agri-business above both the large commercial farmer and the part-time farmer as a clientele (Table 4).

Extension workers are generally viewed as dedicated, hard-working individuals. However, seminar speakers agreed that changes in training required by Extension personnel has not kept pace with changing conditions. Respondents in the perception studies reflect an opposite view.

The need for greater training emphasis in such areas as sociology, adult learning, group dynamics, basic economics, and journalism was stressed by seminar speakers—particularly those who emphasized the growing importance of Extension's leadership role. There was general agreement that Extension must provide for more staff specialization. The rate at which new information is being discovered, the increased number of adult educators, and the degree of specialization in agriculture were given as support for this viewpoint. There was not agreement on the extent or degree of specialization appropriate.

Several speakers expressed the belief that most county personnel are unable to adequately serve today's highly specialized commercial farmer. Somewhat to the contrary, program planning committee members in Montana, feed operators in Kansas, and cotton producers in California felt that, on the average, the Extension staff is well qualified and up to date (see Tables 5 and 6). However, 24 per cent of the fertilizer representatives studied in Arizona indicated that agents were not keeping up too well.

Extension's image within its own parent institution leaves much to be desired.

There is evidence that considerable differences of opinion exist among Extension personnel as to what our image should be. Both Presidents Colvard and Harrington agreed that within schools or

Table 4. Rank order of amount of time and effort that should be devoted to different clientele groups

Clientele Groups	Rank order of amount by states		
	Montana	Kansas	Arizona
<i>Farm</i>			
Average family-size farms	1	1	1
Part-time farms	2	6	6
Small subsistence farms	3	2	3
Farm organizations and commodity groups	4	3	2
Large commercial farms	7	5	5
<i>Non-Farm</i>			
Businesses supplying farmers	5	4	4
Towns and villages under 10,000	6	8	7
Rural non-farm families	8	7	9
Urban and city families	9	10	10
Businesses serving consumers	10	9	8

Table 5. Comparisons of impressions relative to qualifications of county Extension staff

Degree qualified	Percentage responding by states		
	Montana	Kansas	California
Very well	60	66	80
Fairly well	35	32	12
Not very well	3	0	1
Not at all	0	0	0
No opinion	2	2	7

Table 6. Comparisons of opinions of selected clientele groups on how well county Extension personnel keep up-to-date

Extent staff is keeping up	Percentage responding by states			
	Montana	Kansas	California	Arizona
Very well	59	37	83	21
Fairly well	34	52	8	50
Not too well	3	6	2	24
Not at all	0	0	0	0
No opinion	4	5	7	5

colleges of agriculture, and particularly throughout the rest of the university, Extension is not clearly understood. They emphasized the need for Extension to identify more closely with the total university. They also pointed out that the increased size and complexity of our universities have resulted in less intimate contact with a knowledge of Extension.

SUMMARY

Evidence contained in seminar presentations and perception studies completed to date indicate a wide difference of opinion as to what Extension's image is and should be.

While the material cited here has been drawn from a fairly wide range of Extension's "publics" and clientele, it should not be considered inclusive or conclusive.

In view of these two points, and because the image one has of an organization affects not only what he hears and sees about the organization but how he evaluates it as well, it seems imperative that additional thought, observation, and study be given to what the public thinks of Extension.