

## *County Chairman Position*

**Staff with work experience as administrators  
tend to see greater value in the  
position of chairman**

**ROBERT C. CLARK  
and  
FAWZI M. ABDULLAH**

A NOTEWORTHY development in the Cooperative Extension Service in recent years has been the designation of a person as chairman, coordinator, or director of the county Extension staff. Approximately 36 states<sup>1</sup> have established such a position. The individual designated for such responsibility is usually the agricultural agent trained in a subject-matter field and serving in the county at the time the position is established.

Many questions have arisen as to the major responsibilities and scope of authority of the person in such a position. Some Extension workers raise the question as to whether the position is really warranted; they wonder how responsibilities relate to those of the supervisor. Some feel that if the right person is named to this position he can provide much needed leadership within the Service. With the seemingly different opinions about the position, it has appeared appropriate to ask empirically if the position is looked upon in the same manner by different segments of the staff (state administrators, specialists, county personnel, and others). It has appeared appropriate also to ask if persons assigned this new responsibility consider themselves adequately trained.

Studies have been conducted by members of the staff and Fellows of the National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study

<sup>1</sup> *County Extension Organization and Financing Procedures, Summary of Study* (Washington: Federal Extension Service, May, 1963), p. 25.

---

ROBERT C. CLARK is Professor and Director, National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, and FAWZI M. ABDULLAH is Director of Extension, Ministry of Agriculture, Beirut, Lebanon.

and others to gain insights into how this position is viewed. The purpose of this article is to summarize some of the findings from such studies. This discussion will be concerned with (1) factors that are related to how staffs view this new position, (2) what responsibilities they see as appropriate to the position and in what relationship, (3) advantages and problems identified with the position, and (4) training needed to function in the position.

Even though the position is referred to in a variety of ways in different states, the term chairman will be used in this article. This is the title most commonly used, even though two states studied (California and Michigan) use the title county director. In three of the studies being summarized in this discussion, 787 staff members were involved: 296 for Michigan,<sup>2</sup> 250 for Puerto Rico,<sup>3</sup> and 241 for California.<sup>4</sup>

In defining the position, 132 specific responsibilities and activity-items were identified from policy statements, job descriptions, and plans of work. These responsibilities were grouped under eight administrative areas: (1) planning and programming; (2) organization and policy; (3) direction and coordination; (4) supervision; (5) personnel management; (6) administrative relations; (7) business management and finance; and (8) educational leadership. The following discussion centers on an analysis of the position based on this structure of the role.

#### STAFF VIEW OF THE POSITION

Even though differing views of the position were anticipated, it appeared that differences might be related to the various positions of responsibility within the Service. This was found to be the case. What the county staff expected of the position differed from what administrators, supervisors, specialists, or county chairmen saw as appropriate responsibilities. Unlike the other three groups, for example, state administrators tended to attach a greater importance to the role of the chairman in planning and developing the county Extension program. The educational role was highly emphasized as compared to other functions by the administrators. In general, the

<sup>2</sup> Denio A. Caul, "Perceptions of the County Extension Director's Administrative Role in Michigan" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 1960).

<sup>3</sup> Jose I. Fernandez-Ramirez, "Perceptions of the County Chairman's Administrative Role in the Cooperative Extension Service in Puerto Rico" (unpublished M.S. thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 1961).

<sup>4</sup> Fawzi M. Abdullah, "Analysis of the Administrative Role of the County Extension Director in California" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 1964).

supervisory role was perceived to be the least important, particularly with respect to close supervision in the agents' areas of subject matter. Administrators also tended to assign more importance to the chairman's administrative functions than did personnel in non-administrative positions.

Varying degrees of agreement were found between and among the different position groups (administrators, specialists, and county staffs). The highest consensus was reported among the administrative group and a relatively low agreement within the groups of subject-matter specialists and agents. There was complete agreement on slightly over two-thirds of the 132 role items among state administrators and county directors in California and Michigan, as compared to over one-third of the items upon which the county agents agreed.

In comparing how chairmen viewed the position with views of other position groups, there was significant agreement with state administrators on about 90 per cent of the total role items. In contrast, there was low agreement between county chairmen and specialists on more than one-third of the items.

These findings were interpreted to indicate (1) a strong tendency for county chairmen and non-administrative personnel to disagree on the relative importance of the chairman's administrative functions, and (2) a highly significant agreement between chairmen and the state administrative staff. One might speculate from such findings that people who have had working experience in administration tend to see a greater value in it at the primary level in effecting a total Extension program than do people engaged in straight production work. Also, the way in which one views a position might be directly related to his level of understanding of the position and how it influences his responsibilities.

In the California study it was found that Extension workers who participated in advance study and who had longer tenure tended to place major emphasis on such functions as management of Extension resources, evaluating staff for merit increases, and evaluating and preparing reports on county program accomplishments. Findings of the Michigan study were comparable to those of California. County directors serving in the larger counties in both states tended to view their job as strictly administrative. They assigned little or no importance to their performing a teaching function in their particular subject-matter field. However, chairmen in the counties with smaller size staffs tended to place major emphasis on teaching activities in their subject-matter area and less importance on their administrative responsibilities.

The functions of the county chairman is far less clear and understood by the Extension staff than we may think. Operationally, the chairman is the man in the middle. He is between the supervisor and members of the county staff. He is generally responsible for representing the state Extension administration in the county and for implementing the policies and plans of the supervisor. He is also looked to for leadership in many different areas of responsibility by his associates in the county office. Representing the interests and needs of the county staff before various administrative groups is considered by county personnel to be very important.

The county chairman is called upon to play a multitude of roles if he is to meet the expectations of the many groups to whom he is responsible. The findings of the studies in the three states emphasize that, among other things, he should be a teacher, leader, organizer, policy advisor and interpreter, coordinator, personnel manager, reporter, housekeeper, supervisor, business manager, budget controller, communicator, program planner, and public relations man. The position as defined in these studies constitutes quite a job. It is a job that is interpreted differently in many respects. However, there is considerable overall consensus on the way in which the various respondent groups view the importance of the eight major administrative functions. The relative importance attached to these functions is presented graphically in Figure 1.

It is significant to note that educational leadership was viewed as the primary function of the chairman (see Figure 1). Staff members who participated in these studies felt that the chairman

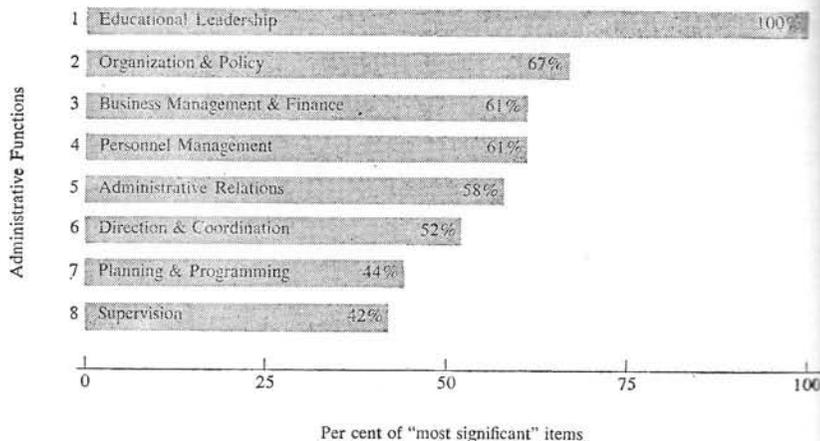


Figure 1. County Extension administrative functions, classified by rank order and percentage of items perceived as most significant by the total Extension staff in California, Michigan, and Puerto Rico.

should provide substantial help to agents in planning and executing programs in their respective areas of subject-matter competence. He should attend and participate in training meetings. He should conduct educational meetings in his own field of technical competence. In other words, the chairman is looked upon to be an educational leader in his own technical field as well as an administrator. As an administrator he is expected to work with people within the Service as well as the many clientele groups with whom Extension cooperates in carrying out its educational responsibilities.

State administrators and supervisors, unlike the other respondent groups, tended to attach the greatest importance to the county chairman's functioning effectively in planning and developing a county program. They viewed the supervisory function as least important, particularly with respect to close supervision over the county agents' areas of subject matter. Also, county agents saw little or no need for the chairman to help them define their job or to supervise their teaching activities.

The staff in Puerto Rico tended to differ substantially from the other groups in ranking these administrative functions. This could be due to the fact that in Puerto Rico at the time the study was conducted there was no person identified on the county staff with over-all administrative responsibilities. Perceptions were based on what the staff assumed the situation to be if such a position existed.

One would normally assume that the California staff would attach greater importance to administrative functions than would the respondents in Michigan and Puerto Rico. This assumption was substantiated by these studies. One of the important reasons for such emphasis in California was the high degree of subject-matter specialization by agents. Another was the large number of staff members identified with many of the county offices.

In a study of county Extension administration in Wisconsin, Peroutky<sup>6</sup> identified four functions. Listed in decreasing order of importance they were (1) finance and business management, (2) personnel management, (3) program planning, and (4) public relations. These four functions were also considered as being highly administrative.

#### ADVANTAGES AND PROBLEMS

Advantages of the position most frequently identified in the California, Michigan, and Puerto Rico studies were that it (1) pro-

<sup>6</sup> Vernon W. Peroutky, "The Agricultural Agent as Administrator of the County Extension Program as Perceived by Agricultural Agents in Wisconsin" (unpublished M.S. thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 1960).

vides for coordination and decentralization of authority, (2) facilitates communication with state staff members and relieves agents of many administrative responsibilities, (3) enhances public relations with the many clientele groups, (4) provides for a continuity of integrated Extension programs, and (5) develops better understanding of county staff's responsibilities. The advantage of decentralization of authority received the greatest emphasis. Helping county staff members understand their responsibilities was also frequently cited in all three states.

The most frequently mentioned disadvantages of the position of county chairman included (1) the heavy workload on one person, (2) the difficulty of selecting a competent chairman, (3) the tendency to build up an administrative position, (4) personality clashes, (5) the over-centralization of authority and domination, and (6) the problem of a person being able to adjust to the frustrating position of chairman. Respondents from Michigan and California expressed more concern about over-centralization of authority at the county level than did the staff in Puerto Rico.

#### TRAINING NEEDS

The scope of responsibilities and complexities of the job of chairman are likely to continue increasing. Consequently, persons in this position, as well as colleagues, are keenly aware of the need for specialized training if the job is to be well done. Almost one-half of the county chairmen in California expressed a definite need for in-service training and graduate study in Extension administration. Particular interest was expressed in such areas as the principles of administration, personnel management (including recruiting, selecting, training, and evaluating professional staff members), tasks associated with the supervision of other county staff members, preparing reports, and maintaining good rapport within and outside the Extension organization. Emphasis was also placed on training in the process of determining and analyzing program needs, inventorying resources for developing a program, and establishing short- and long-range objectives.

Approximately one-fourth of the county directors in California expressed a desire for additional training in various disciplines in the social science field. In order to gain greater acceptance and public support for the Extension program, they expressed a desire to increase their understanding of factors affecting people's behavior, their leadership patterns, and their participation styles in community affairs.

In a study of training needs for county Extension chairmen in Washington, Maxwell<sup>6</sup> found that need was centered in four major areas: public relations, program development, business management and finance, and personnel management. These areas were also considered essential elements of the chairman's job. Considerable emphasis was placed on training in the technical subject-matter fields for the chairman and for other members of the county staff. The expressed desire by county chairmen and their associates to be well prepared as educational leaders in their respective counties was most significant.

#### CONCLUSION

The large number of states that have designated a member of the county staff as chairman or director attests to the increased importance being assigned this administrative responsibility. It is assumed this trend will continue. The responsibilities of such a position are far reaching. The person in this position has the opportunity to greatly influence Extension's educational program. Leadership of a high calibre is required. Extreme care should be taken in designating persons to assume such responsibility. Once the person is chosen he or she should be given every opportunity to receive training for effectively performing the many responsibilities of the position.

Each professional group in the Cooperative Extension Service has a somewhat different expectation of the county chairman. There is a definite need to more clearly define the functions and responsibilities of this position. There needs to be developed a more widely accepted understanding of the job as defined by all members of the Extension staff. The identification of functions and activities in the studies cited in this article should be of assistance in describing the position.

The majority of county chairmen have had limited training for their administrative responsibilities. District conferences, special seminars, and workshops can afford an opportunity for a study of such responsibilities. Special knowledge and skills required to successfully perform the duties can also be developed through a well organized training program. Fortunately there is available a body of principles and facts in administration that are directly applicable to developing a better understanding of this important position.

<sup>6</sup> Joe S. Maxwell, "Analysis of the Inservice Training Needs of County Extension Chairmen in the Washington Agricultural Extension Service" (unpublished M.S. thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 1963).