

## *What Legislators Think of Extension*

**Contacts with and observations of professional staff  
are the most important sources of information on which  
legislators form their impressions of Extension**

**T. C. BLALOCK**

STATE legislators' understanding of the organization and program of the Cooperative Extension Service can influence financial support and other legislative decisions that may expedite or seriously limit the organization's efforts to reach its objectives. Since Extension is supported by public funds, its staff must be aware of and concerned with how the general public and legislative bodies view its efforts. Differences of opinion as to what Extension is or should be doing can cause problems, whether the differences stem from a lack of understanding or from inadequate information.

A number of studies, including respondents who have had responsibility for appropriating funds and providing direction at the local level, have dealt with perceptions held by various groups of Extension clientele.<sup>1</sup> However, the study being reported here was the first to be concerned directly with perceptions of state legislators.<sup>2</sup> Findings will be discussed in this article that may lead to a better understanding of how state legislators view Extension. The findings were obtained from personal interviews with 145 of the 170 members of the 1961 General Assembly of North Carolina.<sup>3</sup> While these findings and conclusions have direct application to the North Carolina Cooperative Agricultural Extension Service, they

<sup>1</sup>For a list of and references to some of these studies see T. C. Blalock, Mary Nell Greenwood, and Roland Abraham, "What the Public Thinks of Extension," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, I (Spring, 1963), 47-54.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas C. Blalock, "State Legislators' Perception of the North Carolina Cooperative Agricultural Extension Service" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1963).

<sup>3</sup>George W. Smith, Associate Director of the North Carolina Cooperative Agricultural Extension Service, worked with the author in collecting data for this study.

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may have implications for Extension Services in similar situations.

#### PERCEPTION OF PURPOSES AND OBJECTIVES

The majority of North Carolina legislators viewed the Extension Service as primarily an educational agency. Over 50 per cent made a direct reference to its responsibility for conducting off-campus educational programs in agriculture and homemaking. However, it appears that they had in mind an action-oriented, problem-solving type of educational program directed primarily at rural people. This general conclusion was supported by the following findings: (1) Just under 50 per cent of the assemblymen, in discussing their understanding of Extension's purposes, made direct and specific references to Extension's job of helping farmers operate their farms more profitably; (2) providing farm families with information (such as how much fertilizer to use, what variety of crop to plant, how to freeze beans) was ranked first in a list of nine of the more common activities of county Extension agents by a substantial margin of legislators; and (3) in discussing the relative priority that should be given to certain clientele groups, approximately three-fourths of the legislators felt that little if any time should be devoted to working with non-farm families.

#### *Organization and Financing*

The legislators were asked to identify the governmental agencies with which they understood Extension to be affiliated. The correct ones (county government, North Carolina State, and USDA) were identified most often. However, over two-thirds of the legislators thought Extension was also connected with the State Department of Agriculture. About one out of five thought there was some legal and official connection with the Soil Conservation Service.

Only a third of the legislators knew the correct procedure for employing county Extension personnel. (In North Carolina this is a joint responsibility between Extension administration at the College and the local county commissioners.) Less than 40 per cent were aware that North Carolina State had responsibility in employing county workers.

Generally speaking, for every legislator expressing full understanding of Extension's financing, there was one who was totally misinformed. More of them were aware that the federal government appropriated money for Extension than identified either the county or state government as a source. From such findings it can be con-

cluded that many legislators were performing their duties relating to Extension on limited—and often incorrect—knowledge of organizational affiliations and methods of financing.

### *Extension Programs*

Opinions of legislators in the area of programs indicated that they saw Extension in its historical and traditional setting—that of an agency concerned primarily with rural problems relating directly to farming and homemaking. Yet, in recent years the Extension Service in North Carolina has attempted to broaden its program to take into account the many off-farm factors that influence agriculture and to fulfill more nearly its responsibilities to the general public. Due to surplus manpower in North Carolina agriculture, Extension has devoted considerable effort to promoting a gradual readjustment in the industry. Nevertheless, 70 per cent of the legislators expressed the opinion that this was not a legitimate function. Fifty-four per cent were opposed to broadening the 4-H program to include areas other than agriculture and homemaking. Just under 50 per cent were opposed to local Extension staffs assisting in activities designed to recruit industry as a means of increasing off-farm employment opportunities.

Several months prior to these interviews, the Extension Service in North Carolina had developed a new and comprehensive five-year program for increasing the state's agricultural income. Local and state-wide publicity was given the plan. Legislators were each mailed two attractive bulletins dealing with this program. However, only 10 per cent had complete knowledge and understanding of this program; 38 per cent had never heard of it. An additional 42 per cent could only recall some vague reference to the program and over two-thirds could not recall seeing either of the bulletins. Such findings indicate that Extension can expect difficulty in communicating with legislators by mass media alone.

In general, legislators felt that Extension should have some concern in each of the nine program areas outlined in the "Scope Report."<sup>4</sup> However, there were marked differences in the relative importance attached to each area. As a basis for comparison, each county Extension staff was asked to rank the nine areas on the basis of the amount of total time and effort devoted to each area during the past two years. Table 1 presents a comparison of the importance legislators placed on each of the nine program areas in rela-

<sup>4</sup> Bryant E. Kearn and O. B. Copeland (eds.), *A Guide to Extension Programs for the Future* (Raleigh, N.C.: Agricultural Extension Service, North Carolina State College, July, 1959).

tion to the amount of time and effort county staffs reported spending on each area. Agreement was rather low, particularly in the areas of marketing and conservation.

There appear to be real differences between legislators and Extension personnel in regard to programs. These differences may be due, in part, to basic differences in philosophy. However, a great part undoubtedly can be credited to incomplete or inaccurate information. Whatever the cause, such differences of opinion could eventually lead to repercussions in the legislature.

*Table 1.* Rank order of relative importance attached to selected program areas by North Carolina legislators and county Extension personnel

Program area	Rank order of importance	
	Legislators	County Extension personnel
Marketing	1	7
Efficiency in agricultural production	2	2
Conservation of natural resources	3	8
4-H and youth development	4	1
Management on farm and home	5	5
Family living	6	3
Leadership development	7	4
Community and resource development	8	6
Public affairs	9	9

Legislators were asked to rank the importance of various groups as Extension clientele. To provide a basis of comparison, Extension administrators ranked the same groups as to their importance as clientele. Marked differences occurred between administrators and legislators as to the organization's responsibility to these clientele groups (see Table 2). While both ranked the average family farm first, legislators ranked small subsistence and part-time farmers much higher than administrators did. On the other hand, administrators rated the large commercial farm and businesses supplying farmers higher than legislators did. It appears that administrators perceived the organization oriented more to serving commercial agriculture than did the legislators.

Legislators were asked how well they knew certain Extension personnel. The county agricultural agent was known most widely—80 per cent knew their county agent very well. Only one per cent indicated they were not acquainted with him at all. The home agent was not known as well—only 55 per cent of the legislators knew her very well; one-third acknowledged that they either knew her

“not very well” or “not at all.” District supervisors were known most of all by the legislators; almost two-thirds (63 per cent) admitted they did not know these individuals at all. Only one in ten knew the supervisors “very well.”

Table 2. Rank order of amount of time and effort that should be devoted to selected clientele groups as perceived by North Carolina legislators and Extension administrators

Clientele groups	Rank order of time and effort	
	Legislators	Extension administrators
<i>Farm</i>		
Average family farms	1	1
Small subsistence farms	2	7
Large commercial farms	3.5 <sup>a</sup>	2
Farm organizations	5	4 <sup>b</sup>
Part-time farms	6	9
<i>Non-Farm</i>		
Agricultural marketing firms	3.5 <sup>a</sup>	4 <sup>b</sup>
Businesses supplying farmers	7	4 <sup>b</sup>
Town and village families	8	8
Rural non-farm families	9	6
Businesses serving all consumers	10	11
Urban and city families	11	10

<sup>a</sup> Tied for third and fourth places.  
<sup>b</sup> Tied for third, fourth, and fifth places.

The importance of legislators knowing Extension’s staff is illustrated by the fact that when they were asked to select, from a prepared list, the one source of information and influence they considered most important in shaping their image of Extension, contacts with and observations of Extension’s professional staff were indicated by an overwhelming majority.

Generally speaking, legislators considered the local Extension staff well qualified, up to date on new developments, and nearly always able to help the average farmer. Only about 10 per cent were critical of the staff’s ability. Almost without exception, these criticisms were associated with the lack of specialization, both in training and in assignments of responsibilities to individual workers.

**INFLUENCES ON LEGISLATORS’ PERCEPTION**

Legislators were classified as low, medium, or high according to (1) their degree of knowledge about Extension, (2) their degree

of appraisal or approval of the organization and the job it has been doing, and (3) their concept of the scope or extent of Extension's responsibilities as a public agency. The relationship between these factors and the legislators' perception of Extension were analyzed. For example, an effort was made to determine whether legislators with a high degree of knowledge about the organization had opinions relative to Extension programs that differed from those of legislators classified as having a low degree of knowledge about the organization, or whether the legislator's relative degree of satisfaction with the organization was related to his perception as to who constitutes appropriate clientele for Extension.

The following are illustrations of how these factors were related to the legislators' perception:

1. Legislators with a high degree of knowledge about Extension tended to rank "businesses supplying farmers" much higher as an Extension clientele group than did legislators with a relatively low degree of knowledge about the organization.
2. Forty-four per cent of legislators classified as having a high degree of appraisal of the organization felt that Extension should be promoting programs in the area of agricultural readjustment. In comparison, only 17 per cent of those with a low degree of appraisal indicated this as a responsibility of the organization.
3. The broader the scope of responsibilities legislators perceived for Extension the more importance they placed on "farm organizations and commodity groups" as appropriate clientele.

Each of the three factors used as a basis for classifying legislators had some association with the legislators' perception of Extension. Their appraisal of Extension (how well satisfied they were with the organization) was more clearly associated with their perceptions than the other two factors.

#### IMPLICATIONS

Extension work is based on the philosophy that research results are almost useless unless interpreted and applied. Even though research findings discussed in this paper must be considered tentative, there are implications that can be drawn. The following seem to be the most important ones resulting from this investigation.

1. Members of the state legislature need to be much better informed about Extension's organizational structure and financing. They need to be impressed with the fact that the Extension Service

is a part of and, therefore, has access to the resources of the state Land-Grant College or University.

2. Legislators need a better understanding of the need for broadening the scope of Extension programs. This would include the need for better understanding of programs in such areas as public affairs, agricultural readjustment, community and resource development, and serving the business segments of agriculture. Social and economic changes have, of course, already made it necessary for Extension to redirect or reorient many of its programs. Experience gained in this study, however, indicates that Extension must constantly strive to see that its programs, as currently oriented, are understood by members of the legislature.

3. Extension needs to exert positive efforts aimed at improving legislators' and the general public's understanding of its organization and programs. Results of this study indicate that, in general, legislators are unaware of many of Extension's accomplishments. As dwindling proportions of legislators are associated with agriculture or have agricultural backgrounds, the need for such efforts will become more obvious.

4. More effective means of communicating with legislators must be found. The findings of this study indicate that routine use of mass media is very inefficient and ineffective in this respect. These findings suggest the desirability of more extensive personal contact with legislators—especially in view of indications that legislators considered it a duty of representatives of an agency to keep them informed. Legislators suggested that this could best be done by the use of both brief printed material and personal visits—they expressed a strong desire for personal visits with someone representing Extension administration. This may be an area in which supervisors could perform a vital service.

5. Criticisms of staff competence centered around general training and qualification for the job and keeping up to date. Even though the proportion of respondents in this study voicing such criticisms was low (only 10 per cent), it is the author's feeling that this is a sufficient basis for suggesting that Extension needs to re-examine how personnel are being trained and how they can function most effectively in various fields of specialization.

KNOWLEDGE is power only if a man knows what facts not to bother about.—ROBERT LYND.