

## Agents' Views of Extension's Role

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*This study investigated the relationship between the agent's definition of Extension's educational role and selected situational and background factors. All 334 male county agents in North Carolina responded to questions designed to reveal whether they had a narrow definition of Cooperative Extension (it is an agricultural agency for farm people) or a broad definition (it is a general adult education organization). It was found that the agent's college major, hours of social science coursework, reaction to a hypothetical study grant offer, and plans for advanced study, were related to his definition of Extension's role.*

THE SCOPE of Cooperative Extension's responsibilities as an educational agency has been the focal issue of numerous writings in recent years. Leaders, both in and out of Extension, have philosophically discussed this question; and, beginning with a series of pioneering studies by Wilkening in the 1950's,<sup>1</sup> this issue has been dealt with in numerous research projects. Blalock, Greenwood, and Abraham presented an interpretive summary of some of the findings in an earlier edition of the *Journal*.<sup>2</sup>

A North Carolina study to be discussed in part in this paper began with the assumption that agents differ in their views regarding Extension's responsibilities. What should program content be, and for whose benefit should Extension commit its resources? The study was concerned with (1) developing and applying a scoring process-

<sup>1</sup> See Eugene A. Wilkening, *The County Extension Agent in Wisconsin: Perception of Role Definitions as Viewed by Agents*, Research Bulletin No. 269 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1957); Eugene A. Wilkening, "Consensus in Role Definition of County Extension Agents and Local Sponsoring Committee Members," *Rural Sociology*, XXIII (June, 1958), 184-97; and Eugene A. Wilkening and Richard Smith, "Perceptions of Functions, Organizational Orientation, and Role Definition of a Group of Special Extension Agents," *The Midwest Sociologist*, XXI (December, 1958), 19-28.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas C. Blalock, Mary Nell Greenwood, and Roland H. Abraham, "What the Public Thinks of Extension," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, I (Spring, 1963), 47-54.

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ture which would adequately assess a given agent's definition of Cooperative Extension's role as an educational agency and (2) investigating the relationship between this role definition and selected situational and background factors. Data were collected by mailed questionnaire from all (334) male county Extension agents in North Carolina in February, 1966.

Conceptually, the agent's definition of Extension's role was assumed to lie somewhere on a continuum. At the "narrow" pole are those who see Extension as an *agricultural* agency responsible for conducting educational programs for *farm* people, with primary emphasis on teaching the knowledge and skills required for efficient production and marketing of agricultural commodities. At the "broad" pole of the continuum are those who view Extension as a *general adult education* agency responsible for conducting diverse education programs for *all segments* of society (farm, rural non-farm, and urban).

In this study, the agent's definition of Cooperative Extension's role was determined by his responses to a series of statements relating to what the organization should and should not do. The following two examples illustrate the nature of the statements. The first is a positive statement; the second, negative:

1. Extension in North Carolina should devote a portion of its resources toward developing a 4-H program for urban youth.
2. It would be "a good thing" if the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service would confine the base of its programs to the field of agriculture.

Response choices were: strongly agree, agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree. Agreement with positive statements indicated a "broad" organizational role orientation; agreement with negative ones indicated a "narrow" organizational role orientation. Agents were asked to react to the statements in terms of "how the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service should utilize its resources—not just what you should do in your own positions."

#### FINDINGS

An item selection technique was used in choosing statements for use in scoring the respondents. Based on responses to these statements, the Guttman scaling technique<sup>3</sup> was employed in assigning

<sup>3</sup>Louis Guttman, "The Cornell Technique for Scale and Intensity Analysis," *Educational and Psychological Measurements*, VII (1947), 247-79.

each agent a score on *scope of the organization's role* (SOR). These SOR scores ranged from 0 through 8; low scores represent a narrow view of the role and high scores a broad view (see Figure 1). An indicator of reliability, the coefficient of reproducibility, is incorporated into the Guttman technique. A coefficient of reproducibility of .90 was obtained in this study. (1.0 is perfect reproducibility, and 0.0 is no reproducibility.)

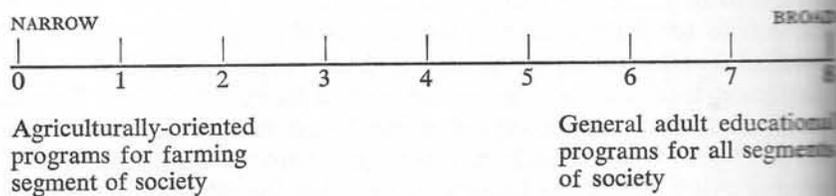


Figure 1. Schematic representation of definition of Cooperative Extension's role scale.

The second phase of the study investigated the relationship between role definition of Extension and selected situational and background factors among the respondents. Some of these findings, and their implications, are summarized in this article (see Table 1).

#### *Field of Undergraduate Study*

Field of study at the undergraduate level was found to be related to the agent's view of the organization's mission. Agents were considered either agricultural technology majors (those majoring in animal science, agronomy, poultry, etc.) or education/social science majors (agricultural education, economics, sociology, etc.). Among 181 agents who were classified as agricultural technology majors, 40 per cent were in the bottom one-third (scores of 0-2) on SOR scores. Only 24 per cent of the 153 classified as education/social science majors were in the bottom one-third on SOR scores. The mean SOR score for the former group was 3.65; the mean for the latter group was 4.21.

These findings suggest that individuals who concentrated in agricultural technology as undergraduates tend to define Extension's role in relatively more restricted terms than those whose undergraduate training was less oriented toward agricultural technology.

#### *Level of Social Science Training*

The *level* of social science training was also related to definition of Extension's role. This classification includes fields, such as education, which are not normally classed as social science. Respondents

were asked: During all your formal training (undergraduate, graduate, summer school, etc.) how many course hours have you had in the social sciences (education, sociology, psychology, economics, etc.)? The response choices were 0-6 hours, 7-15, 16-27, and over 27 hours.

Table 1. The relationship between agents' definition of Extension's role and specified educational experiences and interests.

| Educational experiences or interests | Number of agents | SOR groups <sup>a</sup><br>(scope of organization's role) |          |       | Mean SOR score |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|---|----------|-------|----------------|
|                                      |                  | Narrow  | Moderate | Broad |                |
| <i>College major</i>                 |                  |   |          |       |                |
| Agricultural technology              | 181              | 40  | 32       | 28    | 3.65           |
| Nonagricultural technology           | 153              | 24  | 49       | 29    | 4.21           |
| Total                                | 334              |   |          |       |                |
| <i>Hours of social science</i>       |                  |   |          |       |                |
| Less than 16                         | 130              | 39  | 34       | 27    | 3.62           |
| 16-27                                | 101              | 36  | 42       | 22    | 3.68           |
| Over 27                              | 103              | 23  | 41       | 37    | 4.50           |
| Total                                | 334              |   |          |       |                |
| <i>Response to study grant offer</i> |                  |   |          |       |                |
| Reject offer                         | 45               | 49  | 38       | 13    | 2.93           |
| Study ag. technology                 | 120              | 41  | 37       | 22    | 3.62           |
| Study social science                 | 167              | 23  | 40       | 37    | 4.40           |
| Total                                | 332 <sup>b</sup> |   |          |       |                |
| <i>Plans for advanced study</i>      |                  |   |          |       |                |
| None                                 | 44               | 48  | 39       | 13    | 2.97           |
| Take courses, but no degree          | 158              | 37  | 35       | 28    | 3.73           |
| Get advanced degree                  | 131              | 24  | 43       | 33    | 4.30           |
| Total                                | 333 <sup>c</sup> |   |          |       |                |
| All agents                           | 334              | 33  | 38       | 29    | 3.91           |

<sup>a</sup> Scores for SOR groups were: narrow—0-2; moderate—3-5; broad—6-8.

<sup>b</sup> Two agents failed to respond to this question.

<sup>c</sup> One agent failed to respond to this question.

One hundred and thirty indicated 15 hours or less. The mean SOR score for this group was 3.62. One hundred and one indicated they had taken from 16-27 hours. These had a mean SOR score of

3.68, essentially the same as for those with less than 16 hours. However, among 103 agents reporting over 27 hours the mean SOR score was 4.50. Thus, the most striking difference in views concerning Cooperative Extension's mission occurs between those having taken more than 27 hours in the social sciences and those who have taken less than 27.

#### *Advanced Study Interests*

To discover the areas in which agents felt they needed further training, the following hypothetical situation was posed: If you were offered an \$8000 grant for advanced study, which of the following most nearly represents what you think you would do: Reject the offer; study in some area of agricultural technology; study in some field in the social sciences. Forty-five indicated they would reject such an offer. These had a mean SOR score of 2.93. One hundred and twenty said they would study agricultural technology; these had a mean SOR score of 3.62. One hundred and sixty-seven indicated that they would study in some social science field; these had a mean SOR score of 4.40. (Two agents didn't answer this question.)

Some indication of the extent to which agents expected to pursue advanced study was obtained through responses to this question: At present, what plans do you have for advanced study? Choices were: none; take some additional courses but get no advanced degree; obtain a degree higher than I now hold.

Forty-four responded "none." They had a mean SOR score of 2.97. Another 158 responded "take courses but get no degree" and had a mean SOR score of 3.73. A total of 131 expressed an interest in getting an advanced degree and had a mean SOR score of 4.30. (One agent didn't answer this question.) Thus, the findings indicate that a relatively broad Cooperative Extension role definition tends to be associated with a high level of advanced study plans.

#### INTERPRETATION

In general, a person who defines Extension's role relatively broadly tends to have a high level of training and/or interest in the social and behavioral sciences. This fact is not unexpected. The findings offer empirical support for some common sense expectations.

In analyzing the findings it is important to remember three things. First, the assumption is made that there is no *one* appropriate definition of Cooperative Extension's role for all situations. The mission of the organization as an educational agency may well be defined by

conditions of the local social and economic setting. A narrow or agriculturally-oriented program may be appropriate in a rural farming area, or emphasis may be on a many-faceted adult education program where the needs and interests warrant such an emphasis.

Second, it should be recognized that an agent's view concerning the mission of Extension is influenced by a multitude of factors, many of which may be more significant than those covered in this article. Therefore, no inference is made that an individual's role definition can be predicted from information on formal educational experiences and interests alone.

Third, it must be remembered that agents reacted to what Extension should and should not do in terms of the allocation of its total resources. Those who define the organization's role in narrow terms are saying that agricultural needs of the area should receive major consideration when allocating resources. Conversely, the broad role definers would allocate resources on the basis of total social and economic needs of the area.

If the emphasis in Extension's programs is to reflect the social and economic problems of people in a given setting, the organizational role orientation of the Extension staff member should appropriately be in keeping with those needs and concerns. As administrators recruit and assign personnel, continued attention should be given to the nature of undergraduate training. The findings indicate that even more consideration than at present should be given.

More specifically, agricultural technology majors may constitute the bulk of the Extension staff in an agricultural county; but, where attempts are being made to broaden the base of Extension's programs, these efforts will be more effective if the local staff is reasonably well trained in the social and behavioral sciences.

The findings have similar implications for in-service training. Obviously, efforts to maintain and upgrade the competencies of existing staff members should, and do, take into account the varied social and economic settings in which the workers function (as well as the area of work to which the individuals are assigned). The findings support such a practice because this gives individuals the organizational role orientations appropriate for their work setting.

Finally, if Cooperative Extension is channeling its efforts toward a broader, more generalized adult education program, and if the findings in this study are taken seriously, curricula for students planning a career in Cooperative Extension need to be critically reviewed. The trend toward employing people from fields other than agriculture should be accelerated.