

A Merger of Extension: West Virginia

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The following reports a study of the perceptions and attitudes of county personnel to a merged Extension Service. According to the Joint Study Committee, if Cooperative Extension is to achieve the goals outlined in A People and a Spirit it must have some arrangement for university-wide support. "Some provision also should be made for coordinating the entire extension effort of the institution. . . . The administrative arrangements within the university should not only permit but facilitate and encourage the channeling of all relevant university disciplines to the Cooperative Extension Service."—The editor.*

ALTHOUGH THE TREND started only in the last decade, there are now in excess of 25 Land-Grant institutions that have undertaken reorganization of their Extension Services. The reasons for this attention to organization are many and varied. Among those prompting consideration of university-wide approaches to extension work are the following: (1) the duplication and lack of coordination in regard to structures, clientele, and programs; (2) competition between extension units for funds, status, and leadership; (3) restriction of services to specific clientele groups by extension divisions, resulting in the exclusion of various segments of society; (4) socio-economic problems which are not confined to specific clientele groups or to geographic area; and, (5) increased federal funds available for adult education programs.

The foregoing concerns prompted many university administrators to combine all off-campus extension functions into one unit. Essentially, two types of changes and resulting organizational structures have resulted. One might be termed a *consolidation* and the other a *merger*. A *consolidated extension system* occurred in instances

* *A People and a Spirit*, A Report of the Joint USDA/NASULGC Extension Study Committee (Fort Collins, Colorado: Printing and Publications Service, Colorado State University, November, 1968), p. 81.

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when coordination of extension units was effected by organizational changes at the state administrative level. The organization was consolidated administratively; however, field operations were not directly affected in terms of program content or scope of activities.

A *merged extension system* resulted when all extension units were restructured into a single focus, with the intent of coordinating efforts at all organizational levels. In such a merger, field personnel are responsible for initiating and organizing programs in all subject-matter areas at the county level. Personnel from the appropriate campus or field-based unit assume the actual teaching function.

The Case of West Virginia

Cooperative Extension work in agriculture and home economics was started in 1907 at West Virginia University. Increased state support in 1913 and passage of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914 enabled the University to initiate a program at the county level. Program subject-matter emphasis through the years continued to be largely in agriculture and home economics. Clientele consisted primarily of farmers, rural homemakers, rural youth, and rural community organizations. Agent tenure was high. Personnel turnover was relatively low. A large following of rural leaders and groups supported the program. Up to 1963 few changes had been made in organizational structure or program objectives.

Extension units in other segments of the University (the Colleges of Education, Engineering, Mines) developed during this same period. However, they did not experience the same rate of growth as was the case for work in agriculture and home economics.

On May 1, 1963, the Cooperative Extension Service, General Extension, Mining and Industrial Engineering, the Center for Resource Development, The Office of International Programs, and continuing education programs in law and medicine were formally merged under one administrative head. In addition, a two-year branch college and a graduate center devoted primarily to engineering, chemistry, and business administration were included.

The resulting organization was called the West Virginia University Center for Appalachian Studies and Development—frequently referred to as “The Appalachian Center.” County offices of the Cooperative Extension Service became the off-campus arm of the University. All off-campus functions of the University were to be coordinated through these county offices, whether initiated by the county staff or from the campus. Thus, the county Extension office was, theoretically, transformed from a primarily agricultural and

rural development office to a local office of West Virginia University. This reorganization is classified, according to the analysis presented here, as a "true merger." County personnel were to have access to all schools on the main campus, rather than just the College of Agriculture.

The state was divided into six supervisory areas (it was formerly divided into three districts). Methods of communication and policies became more formalized, supervisory contacts more frequent, and the clientele base broadened. The need for new programs encompassing broader problem areas emerged. Within each county long-range planning of a wider scope and broader advisory committee representation became necessary. Also, it became necessary to involve more people in programming, and to devise efficient methods of operation. Thus, the role of the county agent would need to be broadened in both subject-matter content and clientele.

The Study

A study was undertaken to determine the impact of this merger, after five years of operation, on county Extension agents.¹ Among other things, the study was designed to (1) determine the role perception of agents in terms of scope of clientele groups to be served and subject-matter areas for programs to be provided and (2) determine agents' attitude toward the merged organization.

Data were collected by means of a questionnaire. The 131 respondents included 50 county agents, 46 4-H agents, and 35 home agents—96 per cent of the agents employed at the time.

Agents were asked to indicate the degree of importance they attached to clientele groups typically served prior to the merger (to be referred to as pre-merger) and those additional groups not included in job descriptions or in program emphases before the merger (to be referred to as post-merger clientele groups). Based on mean importance scores (very important, somewhat important, somewhat unimportant, unimportant), county and 4-H agents tended to accord pre-merger clientele groups more importance than post-merger groups. Home agents rated pre- and post-merger groups of equal importance.

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they had actually worked with all clientele groups (pre- and post-merger) in terms of intensity (intensively, some, very little, none at all). Al-

¹ See Howard A. Shriver, "Role Perception and Job Attitudes of West Virginia County Extension Agents in a Merged Extension System" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 1968).

though many post-merger groups were accorded a high degree of importance by all agent groups, the predominant amount of actual work was still with pre-merger clientele. All agent groups indicated some amount of work with post-merger clientele. However, this was not in proportion to the perceived importance they placed on these groups, indicating that perceived change in role was not expressed in drastic changes in program emphases. Home agents appeared to be less pre-merger oriented than county or 4-H agents.

Subject-Matter Emphasis

More than 50 per cent of respondents in each agent group were in agreement that each subject-matter area identified for their respective groups was within the scope of their role. Each group was more in agreement on the pre-merger subject-matter areas they considered part of their role than on post-merger areas (those which did not receive widespread emphasis by agents and were not contained in agent job descriptions or expectations of administrators prior to the merger). Ninety-six per cent of 4-H agents were in agreement that all pre-merger subject-matter areas were part of their role. Agreement on post-merger subject-matter areas was 89 per cent for home agents, 84 per cent for county agents, and 82 per cent for 4-H agents.

County agents were in complete agreement that pre-merger subject-matter areas of agricultural production, farm management, conservation, and 4-H camping were part of their responsibility. They were not in complete agreement on any post-merger subject area.

Pre-merger subject-matter areas on which 4-H agents were in complete agreement included youth development, youth opportunity, leader training, and 4-H camping. They were also not in complete accord on any post-merger subject-matter areas.

Home agents were as much in agreement on post- as on pre-merger subject-matter areas. For example, all agreed that cultural arts, family stability, housing, consumer credit, and voting and citizenship responsibility were part of their role.

Attitude Toward the Organization

As a result of the merger, organizational goals and expectations held by administrators for county positions were substantially expanded. An attempt was made to measure the impact of these expanded goals and expectations on the attitudes of personnel toward the organization.

These items are presented in Table 1 along with the per cent dis-

Table 1. Per cent distribution of agent responses to 11 statements expressing attitudes toward the Appalachian Center by position group.*

Attitude statement	Per cent of each agent group by response category														
	Agree				Somewhat agree				Somewhat disagree				Disagree		
	CA	HDA	4-H	4-H	CA	HDA	4-H	4-H	CA	HDA	4-H	4-H	CA	HDA	4-H
1. If I knew then what I know now I would have looked for another job when the Appalachian Center was formed.	10	3	4	12	10	12	12	26	10	24	52	77	60		
2. The other Extension units and the various schools and colleges on the main campus are going to have to employ more Extension personnel if they are going to give us the kind of help at the county level we need.	40	62	52	34	20	30	30	16	12	10	10	6	8		
3. Since the Appalachian Center was formed I have been able to secure help from other University sources that were unavailable to me before.	20	34	26	54	40	43	12	13	20	14	13	11			
4. I do not understand what is expected of me since the Appalachian Center was formed.	8	3	4	26	28	20	30	22	40	26	47	36			
5. In-service training programs that I have participated in since the merger have not helped me broaden my role or develop new types of Extension programs.	12	10	4	28	22	29	30	26	38	30	42	29			
6. I feel the state legislature in this area appreciates what the University, through the Appalachian Center, is attempting to do for the state.	26	25	18	40	52	44	22	20	36	12	3	2			
7. I prefer to work with farm and rural groups on subjects of interest to them rather than spend my time working on various urban and county development programs with groups of this type.	26	0	9	30	12	20	22	50	24	22	38	47			
8. There is a fine <i>esprit de corps</i> among Extension personnel in this state.	20	13	15	38	50	50	20	35	24	22	2	11			
9. Due to the formation of the Appalachian Center, I have had to expand my programs so much that I am less effective than I was before the merger.	20	16	21	28	25	30	28	36	30	24	23	19			
10. I have had to curtail many of the services that were available to rural residents and groups before the merger; however, this has made me a more efficient Extension agent.	10	22	17	40	48	34	36	30	40	14	0	9			
11. There needs to be more specialists hired at the area level in new subject-matter areas if the Appalachian Center is to work.	36	44	36	36	30	43	14	20	9	14	6	12			

* N = county agents (CA), 50; home agents (HDA), 32; 4-H agents (4-H), 46.

tribution of agent responses by position group for each item. It will be noted that the idea of securing other employment was rejected by the majority of agents in each position group. For example, 78 per cent of the county agents disagreed with the statement about looking for another job (52 per cent "disagree" plus 26 per cent "somewhat disagree"). However, only 58 per cent agreed that there is a fine *esprit de corps* (20 per cent "agree" plus 38 per cent "somewhat agree") among Extension personnel in the state. In regard to whether the merger had made them more effective and efficient, respondents were almost equally divided—about half agreed and half disagreed. The distribution of responses by position group varied for certain of the items. For example, county agents tended to agree more than home agents that there is a fine *esprit de corps* among Extension personnel in the state.

Degree and Manner of Role Change

Agents were asked to indicate the extent to which they perceive their role to have changed since the merger. Since it was necessary that an agent have been employed prior to the merger to provide a meaningful response to this question, only those who had five or more years of tenure were considered (79 of the 131). Responses are reported in Table 2 by number and per cent.

Table 2. Agents' perceived degree of role change since the merger of Extension in West Virginia by number and per cent of personnel with five or more years tenure by position group.

Degree of role change	Position groups							
	County agents		Home agents		4-H agents		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
To a great extent	17	46	5	24	8	40	30	38
To some extent	18	48	13	62	11	52	42	53
Very little	2	6	2	10	1	4	5	6
None	0	0	1	4	1	4	2	3
Totals	37	100	21	100	21	100	79	100

Nearly half (46 per cent) of county agents felt their role had changed to a great extent, compared to less than one-fourth of the home agents and 40 per cent of the 4-H agents. Most of those

agents in each category (91 per cent of all) indicated their role had change to a "great" or "some" extent. Fourteen per cent of the home agents indicated their role had changed little or none.

If an agent who had five or more years tenure indicated that his role had changed (72 of the total), he was asked to characterize that change by choosing one of seven possible responses. Table 3 reveals the outcome of this query. Seventy per cent characterized their role change by one of three of the seven choices: (1) determining overall county and group needs and being personally involved in solving these problems (28 per cent); (2) determining overall county and group needs and securing resource personnel from the University to alleviate these problems (28 per cent); and (3) being competent in both new subject-matter areas and providing programs for new clientele groups (24 per cent). Note that

Table 3. Kinds of role change perceived by Extension agents resulting from a merger of Extension Services, West Virginia University, by position group.

Kind of role change	Position groups							
	County agents		Home agents		4-H agents		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1. Be competent in new subject-matter areas in addition to agriculture and home economics.	0	0	0	0	1	6	1	1
2. To provide educational programs for clientele groups in addition to primarily rural and farm groups.	3	8	1	5	2	10	6	8
3. Be competent in both new subject-matter areas and work with new clientele groups.	11	31	3	15	3	16	17	24
4. To be less intensively involved in determining county and clientele needs but expected to secure appropriate resource personnel or data from the University to help alleviate needs that have been determined by others.	2	6	1	5	2	10	5	7
5. To be intensively involved in determining county and clientele needs, then, expected to secure appropriate resource personnel or data from the University to alleviate these needs.	10	30	5	30	5	26	20	28
6. To be actively involved in determining county and clientele needs, secure appropriate resources from the University, and actively participate in the programs until they have been completed or the needs no longer exist.	8	22	4	40	5	26	20	28
7. To serve primarily as a source of information on a wide range of subjects.	1	3	1	5	1	6	3	4
Totals	35	100	18	100	19	100	72	100

clientele groups and subject-matter areas are common elements of each of these three categories.

Conclusions

Based on evidence from this study, as summarized in this article, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. The role perceptions of agents in West Virginia have changed substantially since the merger of Extension units. These changed perceptions are reflected by (1) an increase in importance attributed to many clientele groups not considered within the scope of responsibility prior to the merger and (2) an increase in subject-matter areas considered to be within agents' responsibilities.
2. The change in role perception was not expressed by drastic changes in program emphases for any agent group. All groups reflected working to some extent with new clientele groups considered appropriate since the merger. However, this work had not been as intensive or comprehensive with post-merger as with pre-merger identified clientele.
3. Home agents appeared to be more oriented to post-merger identified clientele and subject matter than county or 4-H agents.
4. Overall attitude of agents toward the Appalachian Center was generally good when considering that the change was brought about in a short period with a minimum of advanced preparation for personnel. However, there were some aspects of the merger that were perceived more favorably than others.
5. Agents realize the extent of role change brought about by the merger. Implications are that Extension personnel can and will accept broadened role expectations.

In community life, if we seek to achieve leadership and influence, we must master the art of getting along with everybody. We can express our ideas frankly, but we must give others the same right. We must *expect* to encounter opposition, lack of understanding and other annoying manifestations of human nature, for they are natural reactions. A wise man of our acquaintance spends little time with people whose opinions agree with his. He says, "What can I learn from them? I know what they know and they know what I know. So I seek out persons from whom I am likely to hear something different, something new, something challenging.

—THE CURTIS COURIER