

Who Are Extension Council Members?¹

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The author explores county Extension councils to determine if present councils are made up of people who can make decisions about broader, problem-solving based Extension programs. Oberle learned that many council members were recommended by associates or friends, a procedure that contributed to homogeneity in the councils. A homogeneous council, Oberle says, may make it difficult for council members to perceive problems of clientele with characteristics or attitudes that appear different from those of the council members.

Extension Councils

The origin of county Extension councils can be traced to the 1914 Smith-Lever Act. This act provides that the various state Land-Grant Colleges carry on Cooperative Extension work in agriculture and home economics "in such manner as might be agreed upon by the colleges and the Secretary of Agriculture."² Various state governments consented to the provisions and requirements of this act by enacting a county Cooperative Extension law to provide for aid in Extension work.

Among other things, these laws authorized county Extension councils to provide local guidance to Ex-

tension personnel working in the counties. The councils were to consist of state residents who were interested in the Cooperative Extension program and who wouldn't be paid a salary for services rendered to the councils. While the main purpose of the councils was to represent the people's interest in Extension work, the principal function was to cooperate with Extension personnel in planning an Extension education program in agriculture, home economics, and related subjects. The councils were to recommend rather than to make policy. These programs were to be based on a thorough study of the local county, recognition of the problems inherent in it, and analysis of these problems.

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County councils or committees have existed in the various states for over a decade. But if county Extension programs are to be directed toward solving the practical problems of local people, mere existence of the councils or the mere involvement of council members may not be enough.³ If council members hold attitudes toward Extension that limit their contribution toward problem solving, then perhaps the county Extension councils aren't contributing as effectively as they might toward problem solving in particular, or the county Extension program in general.⁴

Individuals, like organizations, vary in their ability to plan for or meet change. Although individuals are generally reluctant to change, some are more reluctant.⁵

The purpose of this study was to do what only one other study has done—examine selected personal-social characteristics of council members and the attitudes of the *same* council members toward the Extension organization as a system or entity.⁶ The findings may have implications for the readiness of council members to help others face change by helping them solve their own problems. If problem solving is crucial to the effectiveness of the county program, then the findings may also have implications for Extension's policy toward county councils.

Illinois Council Members

The study focused on 124 agri-

cultural and home economics county council members associated with the Illinois Cooperative Extension Service.⁷ I wanted to make limited generalizations about the state's entire population of council members from the data collected on council members in the sample. Consequently, I randomly selected one county from each of the five Illinois Extension districts and another at large.⁸ In July and August of 1966, I personally interviewed 67 agricultural and 57 home economics council members.⁹

Council members may hold attitudes toward Extension that limit their ability to help plan a county program geared to the problems of Extension's clientele. Thus, the willingness or intention of council members to help others solve their problems may not be enough. Such attitudes may be related to selected personal-social characteristics.

I asked the council members to answer questions about age, education, occupation, farm size, farm tenure, income, and years lived in the locality and in the county. I also asked them to respond to each of 20 attitude items.¹⁰ (see Table 1, page 27). A total attitude score was computed for each individual council member by adding the actual values associated with his responses to eight attitudinal items.¹¹ Each of the items was selected because it referred to the ability and/or willingness of the Extension organization, the Extension council, or the Extension council member to represent the problems of other individuals.

Table 1. Measuring attitudes toward Extension.

1. The county Extension council really has little control over the county program. The program is mainly determined by the county Extension staff.
2. The county Extension council member should represent a particular group, a particular geographic area, a particular community, and/or minority groups not otherwise represented.
3. A merger of the Cooperative Extension Service and the other areas of University Extension would result in less emphasis on programs for farm families.
4. County Extension council members tend to replace themselves by nominating their personal friends and neighbors, who may or may not be as qualified to represent particular areas, communities, and particular geographic areas.
5. Multicounty programs would increase the effectiveness of the Cooperative Extension Service.
6. The Cooperative Extension Service should place more emphasis on service programs such as soil testing or vaccination and less emphasis on educational programs such as teaching how to take soil samples or how to vaccinate livestock.
7. Rural families are over-represented on the county Extension council.
8. New county Extension council members should receive a special orientation concerning what is expected of them as an Extension council member.
9. The county Extension program is geared more to the larger farmer than to the smaller farmer.
10. A person shouldn't be selected as a county Extension council member unless he has a thorough knowledge or understanding of his community's problems.
11. The county Extension council is gradually losing some of its control over the planning of the county program.
12. The Cooperative Extension Service should place more emphasis on technical information such as the chemical composition of commercial fertilizers and less emphasis on practical information such as how to determine the proper time and method of applying commercial fertilizer.
13. A merger of the Cooperative Extension Service and the other areas of University Extension would greatly expand educational opportunities for both farm and city people.
14. The county Extension staff offers the same quality of service to everyone, regardless of the affiliation with any particular farm organization.
15. The needs of urban people can be met adequately by Extension employees who are college graduates in agriculture or home economics.
16. Each current agricultural and home economics county Extension council member does represent a particular community, group, and a particular geographic area.
17. The Cooperative Extension Service should place more emphasis on keeping local people informed on recent technological advances such as using hybrid corn and less emphasis on human welfare programs such as community development.
18. Many urban people are unaware that the Cooperative Extension Service conducts various educational schools and meetings that are open to the general public at no charge.
19. A merger of the Cooperative Extension Service and other areas of University Extension would give the administrative personnel at the university more control over the county Extension program.
20. Current and future employees of the Cooperative Extension Service need much more education in the area of the social sciences.

Description of Council Members

Personal-Social Characteristics¹²

Age. Most council members were between 40 and 50 years old. Nevertheless, there were a few, 6.4 percent, under 30 and 0.9 percent 65 or older.

Education. The majority of council members had at least graduated from high school. Only 16.5 percent of agricultural members and 26.3 percent of home economics members had not completed high school. Comparisons with data from a 1962 study of Illinois council members suggest that the educational profiles of the two were similar and indicate little or no change. Of the 1966 sample, 10.5 percent (in 1962, 12%) had not been educated beyond the eighth grade, 50.7 percent (in 1962, 55%) were high school graduates or had some high school, and 38.8 percent (in 1962, 32%) had some education beyond high school.

Occupation. Most council members were farmers or farm wives. Of the agricultural council members, 95 percent were farmers, and of home economics council members, 56.1 percent were farm wives.

Farm Size. Of the 75.8 percent of the members who were farmers or farm wives, nearly half had farms from 200-400 acres. Twenty-one percent had farms larger than 600 acres and about 15 percent had farms smaller than 200 acres.

Farm Tenure. There were only three nonfarmers serving on the

agricultural councils sampled. However, 65 percent of the women on the home economics councils said they didn't farm.

Net Income. Few council members had low incomes. About 25 percent of home economics council members and about 12 percent of agricultural council members had incomes of \$10,000 or more. Only a few, 4.5 percent agricultural and 7 percent home economics council members, had annual net incomes less than \$3,000.

Local and County Residence. Nearly all of the council members had resided in the locality and the county at least 10 years. Moreover, the majority had resided in the locality (72.1%) and the county (86.6%) for 20 years or more.

Attitudes Toward Extension

About 70 percent of the Extension council members felt the county council had considerable autonomy in program planning (Item 1). Hobbs reported very similar percentages of response for his sample council members.¹³

Nearly 90 percent of the sample members felt council members didn't practice favoritism in choosing their successors (Item 4). Yet, many of the council members frankly admitted they were recommended by associates or friends.

About 63 percent of the council members felt rural families weren't over-represented on the county councils (Item 7). Hobbs reported that over 80 percent of his

sample members felt rural areas weren't over-represented on the council.¹⁴

Over 90 percent of the council members felt the county Extension program wasn't geared more to the larger farmer than to the smaller farmer (Item 9). Yet, many of the respondents operated fairly large farms.

About 40 percent of the council members felt the county council was gradually losing some of its control over the planning of the county program (Item 11).

About 99.3 percent of the Extension council members felt that each council member actually did represent a particular interest group (Item 16).

Over 80 percent of the respondents felt many urban people were unaware that the Cooperative Extension Service conducts various educational schools and meetings that are open to the public at no charge. This pattern of response is similar to Hobbs' finding that nearly 60 percent of the council members felt there was little demand for the potentially broader programs the Cooperative Extension Service was prepared to offer (Item 18).¹⁵

About 80 percent of the council members also felt current and future employees of the Cooperative Extension Service needed more education in the social sciences (Item 20).

Council Member's Attitudes

The attitude scores ranged between 17 and 40. They were split

(at the median) into two statistical groups to determine which personal-social characteristics, if any, were related to a high or low score.¹⁶ Statistical analysis showed that none of the eight characteristics were significantly related to the attitude scores of the respondents.¹⁷

Because I was puzzled to find that the range of the attitude scores was fairly wide, I categorized the scores by county. I then found significant by-county variation in the respondents' total attitude scores.¹⁸

Thus, there was more variation in the personal-social characteristics of council members or their attitudes toward Extension *between* than *within* counties. This finding suggests that the membership of each county Extension council was relatively pure or homogeneous in that the personal-social characteristics or the attitudes of its members were quite similar.

Selecting Council Members

Homogeneity within councils may be at least partially related to the selection of council members.¹⁹ Even though they're officially appointed by the state director of Extension, nominations of persons to serve on councils originate in the counties.²⁰

As mentioned earlier, many of the council members frankly admitted they were recommended by associates or friends. If the members of a council are friends with similar personal-social characteristics and attitudes toward Extension, then the

atmosphere for problem solving may be less than optimal. Such commonality may make it difficult for the council to accurately perceive the problems of clientele whose characteristics may *appear to be* substantially different from those of the council members.

Because council homogeneity may limit such problem solving, Extension might consider having various organizational leaders submit the names of individuals—members and nonmembers—who they think would be effective problem solvers.

Even if the assumption is made that council homogeneity doesn't limit Extension's problem-solving ability, it likely limits its public image or reputation. This is strongly suggested by the finding that over 80 percent of the council members felt that many urban people were unaware that the Cooperative Extension Service conducts educational programs that are open to the public at no charge.

If urban people aren't aware of the nature, purposes, and functions of Extension, then it isn't likely they might be interested in serving as council members—even if they are effective problem solvers. If Extension is concerned with helping individuals to face change by helping them to solve their problems, then a frequent turnover of individuals serving as council members may increase council heterogeneity and public awareness of, interest in, and service to the Cooperative Extension program.

Footnotes

1. This article is a revision of a paper presented at the Rural Sociological Society meeting, San Francisco, California, August, 1969.
2. Louis B. Howard, "A Guide for County Extension Councils" (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois, College of Agriculture, 1963).
3. Helen P. Quarrick and Eugene A. Quarrick, "Problem Solving in Extension," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, III (Fall, 1965), 137.
4. Muzafer Sherif and Hadley Cantril, "The Psychology of Attitudes," *Psychological Review*, LII (1945), 301. An attitude is defined as a predisposition to action. Extension's attempts to serve nonfarm as well as farm publics has intensified the need for council members to contribute positively to the county program-planning process. See Emory J. Brown, "Adapting Extension to Urban Environment," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, III (Spring, 1965), 15; Clarence M. Ferguson, "Changing Times, Changing Programs," in Robert C. Clark and N. P. Ralston, eds., *Directing the Cooperative Extension Service* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, National Agricultural Extension Center for Advanced Study, 1962), p. 16; E. T. York, Jr., "Cooperative Extension's Contributions to National Goals," in Clark and Ralston, eds., *Directing the Cooperative Extension Service*, p. 51; Walter C. McKain, "Rural Suburbs and Their Peo-

- ple," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, I (Summer, 1963), 84; and Robert C. Bealer, Fern K. Willits, and William P. Kuvlesky, "The Meaning of 'Rurality' in American Society: Some Implications of Alternative Definitions," in Rex R. Campbell and Wayne H. Oberle, eds., *Beyond the Suburbs: The Changing Rural Life, Book I* (Columbia, Missouri: Lucas Brothers, Publishers, 1967), pp. 14-22.
5. J. Paul Leagans, "A Concept of Needs," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, II (Summer, 1964), 89-96.
 6. Daryl J. Hobbs, "Missouri County Extension Councils: Their Characteristics, Attitudes, Knowledge, and Opinions" (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri, Department of Rural Sociology, 1965).
 7. County councils in Illinois assumed their duties on July 1, 1956.
 8. Cook County was excluded from the sampling because it was metropolitan. Lee, Stark, Macon, Montgomery, and Wayne counties were excluded because they were pilot counties in a role orientation study.
 9. Data were collected on 90 percent of the total sample; the other 10 percent weren't available for interviewing.
 10. The numerical values of 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1 were respectively assigned to the responses: "strongly agree," "agree," "uncertain," "disagree," or "strongly disagree."
 11. The total attitude score was based in Items 1, 4, 7, 9, 11, 16, 18, and 20 (see Table 1).
 12. Although more or less proportional council membership may not mean the solution of the problems of a given stratum of the local population, it at least may be viewed as an objective indicator of which segments of the local population have someone on the council who may be able to view their problems as they do.
 13. Hobbs, "Missouri County Extension Councils," p. 53.
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
 15. *Ibid.*
 16. One group included 63 respondents who had a total score between 17 and 29, whereas the second group included 61 respondents who had a total score between 30 and 40. The mean and standard deviation of the scores were 29.3 and 4.2, respectively.
 17. Chi-square analysis was used to measure the statistical relationship between each of the personal-social characteristics and the total attitude scores. Although 4 of the relationships were statistically strong, none were significant at the .05 level.
 18. Statistically significant at the .01 level of above.
 19. Recent observations in Illinois suggest a trend away from the relative homogeneity mentioned above.
 20. Howard, "County Extension Councils."