

## How Community Leaders View Extension

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This study focuses on finding out how leaders in three small communities view Extension. The results tell us that community leaders see the importance of Extension primarily as it contributes to the economic development of their communities. This economic orientation is reflected in what the leaders know about Extension programs, their opinions on which programs are most important, and their perceptions of the developmental needs of their communities. The author discusses implications for Extension and outlines some strategies that Extension might use in working with these community leaders.

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In the 1971 summer issue of the *Journal of Extension*, Editor Jerold W. Apps discusses some of the problems Extension faces in relating to community decision-makers and the "power structure."<sup>1</sup> He says that increasingly Extension is finding itself defending decisions about programming, staffing, and resource allocation. He concludes: "The problem is how to keep Extension's clientele, community decision makers, power structure, and other organizations informed about what it's doing, and, if appropriate, involved in making the decisions.

What do Apps' comments imply? They seem to imply that Extension can't ignore community leaders. More than that, they

imply that it's time for Extension to play a deliberate political game, if necessary, to obtain the support of community influentials.

Is this possible? Can Extension work out strategies to generate power structure support for its programs and policies? Obviously there are no simple answers to such questions.

However, we'll come closer to some answers if we have more information about how community leaders feel about Extension programs, what they know about Extension, and what needs they think Extension should work on.

In other words, we need to have some idea of community leaders' present thinking before we can develop effective strate-

gies for strengthening the political support available in communities. Or, indeed, before deciding whether it will be worthwhile to try at all.

### Source of Information

Some of this article's information comes from a study of community leaders and Extension in three small communities in a midwestern state.<sup>2</sup> The study concludes that: community leaders see the importance of Extension as it contributes to the economic development of their communities. This economic orientation is reflected in: (1) the leaders' knowledge of Extension programs, (2) their opinions of which programs are most important, and (3) their perceptions of their communities' needs.

This conclusion raises several important questions about alternative strategies, which we'll explore later. But first, let's look at the study itself and its findings.

### The Study

The study was located in three small cities in one county in the midwest. The largest city, Community A, with a population of about 8,000, is the county seat. The second city, Community B, is a farming and agribusiness center of 3,700 people. Community C provides a contrast—a resort town with a large tourist industry. It has almost 2,400 people.

The first task was to identify the leaders in each community. To do this, I used a version of the reputational technique recommended by Powers.<sup>3</sup> This procedure involves asking knowledgeable informants who the leaders are in their communities.

Beginning with the mayor and five organizational leaders, I used a snowball procedure when interviewing from 26 to 31 informants in each city. Interviewing stopped when no new names were given.

The lists were then examined for breaking points to use in distinguishing leaders from non-leaders. The breaking point selected fell between three and four nominations. Thus, people with four or more nominations were designated as community influentials.

A total of 54 leaders was identified and interviewed: 19 in Community A, 15 in B, and 20 in C. An Extension faculty member was identified as a leader in Community A. He's omitted from the analysis since his responses aren't typical of community leaders.

The majority of the leaders were middle-aged, and most had education beyond high school. Business and banking were the most common occupations, followed by medicine, law, and teaching. Two farmers in Community B rounded out the list. All leaders were men. These findings agree with most other leadership studies. As a point of

interest, one member of the County Agriculture and Extension Education Committee was identified as a community influential.

### The Findings

Leaders' answers to three different questions on the interview schedule provided evidence of their economic orientations.

#### Community Needs

In the first question, leaders were shown a list of nine programs and asked to select the four they felt were most important for their communities. The nine programs were chosen to represent three types:

1. Programs aimed at developing the physical and economic structure of the community. These programs had no obvious educational component and included such things as obtaining new industry and business for the city.
2. Educational programs, with an implied economic benefit such as business management and occupational retraining.
3. Educational programs with no obvious or implied economic benefit, including public affairs programs and expansion of library facilities and programs.

Table 1 shows the number and percentage of leaders' choices falling into each category. You can see at a glance that leaders' choices went overwhelmingly to the direct economic programs. Educational programs with an economic payoff came next and the straight educational programs were a poor third. These results suggest that community leaders will give greater support to programs directly related to economic development.

#### Knowledge of Extension Programs

I wanted to find out how familiar leaders were with Extension programs. So, I gave them a list of 10 program areas and asked them to identify those Extension was programming in.

Although there were Extension programs in all 10 areas, most leaders named considerably fewer. Indeed, five leaders identified none of the programs. On the average, leaders in Community A, where the Extension office is located, recognized 7.5 program areas compared to an average of 5 in the other communities.

As might be expected, leaders were most familiar with visible and traditional programs (agriculture, family living, and youth development) and with programs directly related to the community's economic development—resource and industrial development programs. Leaders were much less aware of newer programs

**Table 1. Leaders' perceptions of types of programs needed in their communities.**

Program area	Community						Total	
	A		B		C		N	%
	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Economic	37	52%	31	57%	44	64%	112	58%
Education-economic	28	39	16	30	14	20	58	30
Education	6	8	7	13	11	16	24	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>99%</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>100%</b>

and programs not directly related to economic development, including consumer education and public affairs.

These findings support the view that leaders have an economic orientation and that this influences their awareness of Extension programs.

#### Importance of Extension Programs

Leaders were asked to rate the importance of the 10 Extension program areas on a 3-point scale (very important, fairly important, and not very important). Table 2 shows the number and percentage of leaders who rated each program area as very important.

As might be expected, the importance given to different program areas varied from one community to another. However, community improvement programs (including industrial development) were near the top of the list in all three cities. This is another indication of the leaders'

concern with the economic development of their communities. However, it's surprising business development programs weren't rated higher.

Differences in the communities' economic bases were reflected in the findings. For example, Community B, the agricultural center, ranked agricultural production and marketing programs high. The resort town, Community C, ranked these programs close to the bottom and gave natural resource development programs first importance. Again, these findings show the high value leaders place on programs directly affecting the economic welfare of their communities.

#### Implications for Extension

Several conclusions can be drawn from the study's findings. First, community leaders view Extension and its programs through an economic screen. This economic orientation influences which Extension programs

Table 2. Number and percentage of leaders' rating Extension program areas as very important.

Program area	Community			Total
	A	B	C	
	N=18 N %	N=15 N %	N=20 N %	N=53 N %
Business improvement	8 44%	6 40%	10 50%	24 45%
Recreation development	9 50	6 40	8 40	23 43
Community improvement	14 77	13 87	11 55	38 72
Agricultural production	14 77	12 80	4 20	30 57
Agricultural marketing	10 56	13 87	7 35	30 57
Family living	6 34	8 54	10 50	24 45
Consumer education	5 28	8 54	5 25	18 34
Youth development	12 67	11 73	11 55	34 64
Public affairs education	10 56	9 61	10 50	29 55
Use of natural resources	16 89	8 54	14 70	38 72

are known to leaders, which programs are seen as most important, and which types of programs are seen as needed in communities. In short, leaders evaluate Extension on how it relates to their community's economic development.

Further, the specific nature of leaders' views varies from one community to another. This variation reflects differences in the communities' economic bases. For example, we can't say that programs in agricultural production will always be seen as important. This depends on whether agriculture is an important part of a community's economic base. What we can say, however, is that any program seen as affecting a community economically will be viewed as an important program.

This study also found that few, if any, Extension agents are identified as community leaders. Consequently, Extension staff aren't likely to have much influence on leaders' views of Extension unless deliberate steps are taken to change the situation. Without this, the prime influence will continue to be economic.

The major conclusion of this study—that leaders' perceptions of Extension programs are colored by a basic economic orientation—should not surprise us too much. After all, the economic development of their communities is of vital importance to leaders, since most are businessmen. Someone who sells real estate or owns a bank or a store is understandably concerned with the economic dimension of his community.

However, let's assume community leaders can influence the success or failure of Extension programs (and there's plenty of evidence to support that assumption). Then, it's important to consider what the consequences of this economic orientation may be.

Specifically, what are the implications for Extension workers? The most obvious one is that it shouldn't be too difficult to gain support for programs that hold promise for the economic development of the community. However, it may be more difficult to obtain leaders' support for programs with no obvious economic benefits.

### **Strategies and Alternatives**

Given this situation, the Extension agent is frequently caught between two conflicting sets of expectations. On one hand, agents are faced with the expectations of community leaders and traditional clientele who prefer Extension to focus on "safe" programs, preferably with an economic payoff. And, on the other hand, the Extension Service's current emphasis on "affirmative action" sets up expectations that agents will take definite and positive steps to move beyond traditional programs and clientele.

Thus, it becomes important for Extension agents to consider what strategies are open to them in dealing with these conflicting demands. The strategies discussed

below reflect my views of Extension and the available alternatives. Other views and strategies are certainly possible.

#### **"Don't Rock the Boat"**

One alternative is to follow the adage that "he who pays the piper calls the tune" and to focus on programs with an economic impact. This "don't rock the boat" philosophy has the attraction of safety, but it also has drawbacks. One danger is that Extension's programs would be out of balance because of an over-emphasis on one aspect. Important problem areas might be ignored by Extension because they lacked an economic focus.

#### **"Go It Alone"**

A second alternative is to go it alone—don't cater to leaders' interests or try to gain their support. Those who choose this route usually hope support and goodwill from traditional and accepted programs carries over to newer program areas.

What frequently happens, however, is the reverse. Most Extension agents know traditional clientele and leaders who drag their feet when Extension moves into new program areas. And many have encountered active opposition from influentials, including county boards and Extension committees, if they try to program in "controversial"

areas. Such opposition can often block programs.

The problem is that many of Extension's newer programs and many of the communities' needs *are* controversial. They're controversial because they deal with value-laden problems like sex education, birth control, and drug education, or with nontraditional clientele such as welfare families and migrant labor. Frequently a community leader has difficulty seeing the value of these programs, particularly when he views them through an economic screen. His opposition is perfectly understandable, given his perception of what Extension should be doing.

"Can't Lick 'Em, Join 'Em"

This situation suggests a third strategy for Extension. Rather than ignoring community leaders and hoping for the best, it calls for overcoming opposition and obtaining leaders' support. Within this strategy, a variety of approaches can be used, ranging from education to political involvement.

The educational approach focuses on trying to broaden leaders' views of the community and its needs. It tries to show leaders how Extension's programs can contribute to the well-being of the community and its citizens, even though the economic payoff may be indirect or nonexistent.

It's possible this approach would work some times. It's more

likely, however, that some political involvement will be needed. Jeffrey provides an example in his article on "Extension's Involvement in Politics: A Case Study."<sup>4</sup> He points out that involvement in the political process doesn't necessarily mean involvement in partisan politics. It does mean, however, becoming familiar with the decision-making machinery. It also means being willing to accept the inevitable compromises called for by the political process.

It's questionable whether most Extension agents are sufficiently politically astute to use this approach at present. But there's no reason why they couldn't be.

"If All Else Fails, Change It"

There's a fourth strategy that Extension could adopt if all else fails—try to change the existing power structure. This task is, of course, extremely difficult and calls for a degree of political skill and risk taking that's probably unrealistic to expect.

### Final Answer—Political Finesse

What route should Extension follow? It's not likely that any one route will provide the final answer. Only by experimenting with different strategies and combinations of strategies will we gain the experience we lack now. Further, we need to share the results of our experiences, both

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successful and unsuccessful, with our colleagues.

It seems clear, however, that Extension can no longer afford to ignore the political arena or to approach it on an ad hoc basis. At the very least Extension must develop more finesse in playing the political game, if it wants to work on some of society's crucial problems.

#### Footnotes

1. Jerold W. Apps, "The Editor's Page," *Journal of Extension*, IX (Summer, 1971), 4.
2. For a detailed report of this study, see Gwenna Moss, "An Analysis of Community Leaders' Orientations Toward Adult Education" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1970).
3. Ronald C. Powers, *Identifying the Community Power Structure*, North Central Regional Extension Publication No. 19 (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University, Cooperative Extension Service, November, 1965).
4. Arthur D. Jeffrey, "Extension's Involvement in Politics: A Case Study," *Journal of Extension*, VIII (Winter, 1970), 33-39.

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