

forum

The Forum provides an outlet for readers of the Journal of Extension to express their views on any topic important to Extension work. In the Forum for this issue, we provide a statement pulled together by John Ohliger titled "A Jaundiced View of Agricultural Extension." We have asked a number of Extension workers around the United States to reply to Ohliger's jaundiced view in this same Forum.

Many critics of Extension work express negative views based on little research. At the same time many supporters of Extension education express positive views often also based on little research. We hope this Forum will provide ideas and philosophies worth researching from both opinions. You're encouraged to read the Ohliger article plus the responses. We'd like to have a contribution from you for the Forum in the next issue of the Journal of Extension.

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A Jaundiced View of Agricultural Extension: I know that most readers of this *Journal* can inundate me with facts and expertise on Cooperative Extension. My experience with Agricultural Extension is very meager compared to most readers, so I feel a little like I'm leaping into a den of wild lions. But I'd like to present my generally negative view based on experiences I've had and reading I've done.

I really first heard about Cooperative Extension back in the midfifties when I started graduate studies in adult education at UCLA. I grew up in big cities and rarely even visited a farm.

In my first adult education course at UCLA, I was exposed to the book by Sheats, Jayne, and Spence, *Adult Education: The Community Approach*, which says:

The program of the Agricultural Extension Service is of great significance to the adult-education movement in the United States, not only in its own right but because its record of progress and solid accomplishment over a period of more than a generation is our best demonstration of the fact that the behavior patterns of adults can be changed in significant ways by a program of adult education. . . .

The achievements of the Extension Service tend to confirm the faith of many adult educators in the great social and individual values to be derived from programs of adult education, . . .¹

This kind of uncritical praise is still appearing in adult education textbooks.

I received my first shock in 1967 when I joined the graduate adult education faculty at a midwestern university, had ag students in my classes, and served on their doctoral committees in the College of Agriculture.

I found most ag students and faculty conservative, if not reactionary, paternalistic toward poor people, and unwilling to stand up and challenge the system at any point, even when they strongly disagreed with it. The ag students seemed more timid and conformist than even the general run of adult education students—who aren't noted for their rebel ways. The faculty appeared, at the same time, generally smug in their specialties and insecure about their positions. When I asked a prominent member of the ag faculty why so many farmers had left the farm, he replied simply that they were incompetent or lazy—unable to adapt. A friend who had worked for several years as a graphic artist for a large Ag Extension Service told me that the fear of and praise for big business interests expressed by her fellow workers appalled her. And a highly regarded member of an ag faculty at another university talked to me about his great dismay at what he had done to farmers when he was a county Extension agent.

I discovered an article by a man who had been a county agent and Extension specialist for 11 years. Paul Miller concluded in 1966 that Agricultural Extension is:

... classic documentation of the fact that inserting knowledge through individuals and groups for the solution of public problems may not, in the end, be education.²

I also found a 1973 monograph written by Miller, now president of the Rochester Institute of Technology, in which he states:

... the rural movement's genius for social organization lagged behind its genius for technological invention. Seventy-five years after the advent of the county agent and all the technological and organizational expertise he represented, the rural areas had achieved an economic miracle, but the quality of human services had actually declined relative to the rest of the nation.

... the rural case demonstrates how underinvestments in human resources and institutions can have negative consequences for the quality of human life.³

I began to look further.
Jack London comments:

... there is growing evidence that the Cooperative Extension Service has developed a highly specialized clientele, contrary to its reputation, at the expense of *not* serving the small farmer (former backbone of the organization), the rural poor, minorities, farm laborers, small town businessmen, small town government, and non-farm rural peoples. . . .

A recent study evaluating the work of the land grant schools and Cooperative Extension Service asserted that . . . "Extension has deteriorated to the point that it is not much good to anybody, except maybe 15,000 extension agents who otherwise would have to look for work." This may be an unfair criticism of Extension but does reflect some of the anger of those who investigated the program. . . . Whether it has been in research or in adult education, the focus and commitment lies with the affluent farmer and agribusiness. This study—*Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times*—presents some interesting evidence of how special interests are supported to the disadvantage of the small farmer.⁴

I went looking for that study London referred to which was prepared by Jim Hightower for the Agribusiness Accountability Project. Hightower says:

Like the other parts of the land grant complex, Extension has been preoccupied with efficiency and production—a focus that has contributed much to the largest producers. . . . And while the rural poor get little attention from Extension professionals, they receive band-aid assistance from highly-visible but marginally helpful programs like nutrition aids. . . .

The poor get even less attention than appears on the surface. 4-H—that social club of youth—received \$72 million in 1971 and accounted for the largest allocation of extension agents' time—over one-third of the total. And with this time and money 4-H helps the rural poor by conducting litter clean-up days and awarding ribbons to everybody.

. . . Who does Extension serve? Like their research and teaching colleagues in the land grant complex, extension agents walk hand in hand with agribusiness. To an alarming degree, extension agents are little more than salesmen.⁵

I even discovered there's some evidence that Extension, since its historical beginnings, has been an influence in one political direction. Berger wrote in a book based on Congressional investigations that at the time Extension got started:

The country was still largely rural, and business feared another Populist-style revolt. Such industrial giants as John Deere, International Harvester, the Great Northern, Pennsylvania, and Rock Island Railroads, and the Chambers of Commerce saw the county-agent movement as a safe antidote to more radical farm movements. . . . It received a boost from the dominant business interests of the day.⁶

Finally, Paulo Freire, the great Brazilian adult educator, who's now with the World Council of Churches, denies that the Extension approach is education at all. In his most recent book available in English, Freire writes of his experience with Extension in Chile and Brazil, but perhaps his views are applicable to this country. Freire says:

The act of extension involves the relationship between human beings and the world in order for human beings to

be better equipped to change the world. Thus, the concept of extension which is characterized by the transference of techniques and knowledge is in direct contradiction to a truly humanist outlook. . . .

True education incarnates the permanent search of people together with others for their becoming more fully human in the world in which they exist. . . .

There is in the concept of extension an unquestionably mechanistic connotation, inasmuch as the term implies an action of taking, of transferring, of handing-over, and of depositing something in someone. . . .

The action of extending, in extension, is anti-dialogical. As such, it is incompatible with true education.⁷

Thus, the experiences I've had with Agricultural Extension personnel, and the reading I've done recently, have led me to a different point of view than is presented within the standard adult education textbook. It's heartening to me to discover that some Agricultural Extension students and faculty are beginning to question some of the rhetoric they've heard about the agency. I'm warmed by their courage in taking a hard look at the vested interests supporting their work and by their attempts to find other more humanistic ways of educating adults in rural areas.

Footnotes

1. Paul Sheats, Clarence Jayne, and Ralph Spence, *Adult Education: The Community Approach* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1953), p. 99.
2. Paul A. Miller, "A National Policy for Adult Education," *Adult Leadership*, XIV (January, 1966), 220.
3. Paul A. Miller, *The Cooperative Extension Service: Paradoxical Servant* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Publications in Continuing Education, 1973), p. 1.
4. Jack London, "Reflections Upon the Relevance of Paulo Freire for American Adult Education," in *Paulo Freire: A Revolutionary Dilemma for the Adult Educator*, Stanley Grabowski, ed. (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Publications in Continuing Education, 1972), p. 24.
5. Jim Hightower, *Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times: The Failure of the Land Grant College Complex* (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1973), pp. 118-33.
6. Samuel R. Berger, *Dollar Harvest: The Story of the Farm Bureau* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath Company, 1971), p. 91.
7. Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), pp. 94-112.

Responses to "A Jaundiced View"

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There is no question that Ohliger's comments in "A Jaundiced View of Agricultural Extension" will raise the ire of a number of Extension workers; however, his hostility to Agricultural Extension causes little stir in the bosom of this Extension worker. His article, similar to many that I have read, is in all likelihood due to "urbanitis."

He lacks an understanding of the rural scene if he truly believes the "prominent" faculty member who stated that the reason so many farmers left the land was because "they were incompetent or lazy—unable to adapt."

It seems to be Ohliger's view that 4-H does not contribute to the well-being of the socially deprived. Ohliger quotes from Jim Hightower: "4-H—that social club of youth—received \$72 million in 1971 . . . , " etc. Spending 70 million on 4-H or 100 million on the Expanded Nutrition Program is a mere fly in the ointment when compared to the total U.S.A. national budget. This 170 million would hardly light the fuse for one of the flights to the moon.

Ohliger quotes from Jack London: ". . . *not* serving the small farmer, the rural poor, minorities, farm laborers, small town business, etc." I observed and experienced many exciting new developments in people-oriented programs—programs for the needy—during a 28,000-mile tour and visits with hundreds of Extension workers in 22 states of the United States in 1971-72.

Prior to my tour, Frank Forbes, University of Minnesota, stated in a letter to me, "every effort is being made to expand our educational effort in Extension work to meet the needs of all people—low income, high income, urban, rural, young and adults, black and white." I observed, first-hand, Extension programs with low-income families in the metropolitan-Twin Cities area. Their programs were reaching "real-people" needs.

If Ohliger were to spend several days, as I did, on field work with Oscar Hopkins, Hiram Wallace, and Judy Feiock in the Lincoln Hills areas of Indiana—all Extension workers, it would soon dispel the myth that Agricultural Extension is avoiding poverty and low-income groups, and people-oriented projects.

A visit with Marilyn Jarvis-Eckert, Extension program leader, Appalachian Center, West Virginia University, who is working with low-income families, would literally warm the blood of those who show a cool attitude towards what is being done for people.

Mabel Dorsey, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, stated during a visit I had with her: "We plan programs *with* people—not for people . . . to see a mother of nine make a decision to go back to school because of her involvement in Extension is most gratifying." How true. Spend a day with any one of these hundreds of dedicated workers and you'll soon realize that all is not lost. The results of their work with the poor is sufficient testimonial of the dedication of workers to helping those who need help.

Rub shoulders with Demsey Seastrunk of Texas or Steve Evans of Iowa for a few days and you will observe "gut level" Extension programs for low-income farmers. Results are dramatic, even more dramatic than the results obtained by work-

ing with farmers some 50 years ago. These Extension workers are able to report a 400% increase in adoption of better farm practices.

An old friend of mine once said "never criticize an Indian till you walk in his shoes." I wonder how many times Ohliger has helped an Extension worker literally lift a person up by the boot straps to a meaningful role in life or bring a farmer from poverty to a position in the sun. Travel for a few days, John, with a live and exciting Extension worker, and you will, I'm sure, change your jaundiced view of Agricultural Extension in the United States. If so, the next time you walk into the lions' arena, you will be able to extend a calloused paw, to one already calloused.

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I would take seriously any article about Cooperative Extension, pro or con, if it were based on strong convictions, substantial experience, and knowledge of the subject. "Jaundiced View" doesn't qualify—it is based solely on second- and third-hand opinions.

I might be mildly interested in a collection of opinions if those opinions were from recognized authorities with unquestioned knowledge of the subject. Ohliger's authorities are two unnamed "ag faculty" members, a graphic artist describing her fellow workers' attitudes, two named but unidentified authors—one of them quoting somebody else, one author of a well-known, biased polemic on agriculture, one named but unidentified author of a book on the Farm Bureau, and one Brazilian adult educator with The World Council of Churches.

It seems to me Ohliger is "warmed," not by courage, but by opinions from far afield and by irrelevancies. What someone else thought about Extension activity in Chile and Brazil or what the Rock Island railroad thought when "Extension got started" is not manifestly relevant to Extension here and now. At one point, we are taken to task for not being a universal, all-purpose social agency serving the poor, minorities, farm laborers, small town businessmen, small town government. At another, we are charged with being "anti-dialogical" and not engaged in "true education."

The only "experience" he refers to—with "ag students and faculty"—suggests that Ohliger is not even clear about what Cooperative Extension is. Experience with "ag students and faculty" is not really experience with Extension; experience at *one* university is not really an adequate sample for any kind of judgment; and, I might add, a professor who can substitute the statement, they were "lazy or incompetent," for the complex social and economic forces that explain why farmers had left the farm is not really representative of university faculty members anywhere.

Like any human organization, Cooperative Extension has its imperfections and failures. We need informed, substan-

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tive, constructive criticism if we are to remain a viable and relevant organization. None of these qualities are present, unfortunately, in Ohliger's discussion.

John Ohliger admittedly speaks from inexperience, a narrow perspective, and a lack of understanding of the program or philosophy of the Cooperative Extension Service. He is very selective in quotes from references and experts, most of whom are reactionary, as Ohliger appears to be. I encourage him to broaden his base of understanding through additional reading and involvement in local, county, and state Extension programs. As a lioness, in John's "den of wild lions," I attack his point of view from the perspective of a home economist with 25 years of Extension experience.

Some Extension home economics programs are traditional, but many nontraditional ones relate directly to issues currently in news headlines. The following are examples of program emphases, for rural and urban audiences:

- Food and health problems of the community and world.
- Use and misuse of energy and the environment.
- Affect of inflation, recession, and consumerism on families and individuals.
- Individual decision making related to basic needs of people.
- Community decision making related to taxation, legal affairs, and out-of-home services.
- Family communication and interpersonal relationships.
- Changing families, life styles, values, and attitudes of people.
- Volunteer, professional, and political leadership development.

Extension home economists are adult educators, in communities, where the action is. They are in strategic positions to affect changes in attitudes, skills, and knowledge of people in the social, psychological, economic, and political climate of today. They are contemporary in their approaches to the "real" needs of people—of all ages, income levels, and ethnic groups. They reach people with educational programs by: providing training and educational background for local leaders and paraprofessionals to use with organized youth and adult groups; conducting educational workshops, seminars, and conferences, for a variety of public groups; disseminating information via mass media; and providing information through publications, newsletters, and other printed word.

They are effective in coordinating their Extension educational effort with resource people in other agencies, business, and educational units within their communities.

Extension home economists are not reactionary, radical, or traditional in their adult education programs. They are effective and responsive to the current situation, background, and needs of local people. I challenge John Ohliger to spend some time in Minnesota, with some of our sharp home economists as they plan, implement, and evaluate Home Economics-Family Living programs. Such an experience could broaden his sights and expand his understanding of the value of Extension adult education programs, especially those related to home and family life.

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Ohliger is to be commended for selecting a very appropriate title for his forum, "A Jaundiced View of Agricultural Extension." According to Webster, jaundice means "a state or attitude characterized by satiety, distaste, or hostility." A "jaundiced" view of Extension describes it very well.

However, it is puzzling that the editor of such a scholarly publication as the *Journal of Extension* would select and print an article based on hearsay. It is on this premise that I question whether the article deserves comment. Those responsible for writing and publishing the article deserve commendation for their "courage" (brass) . . . if not their wisdom.

Ohliger's jaundiced perspective of Agricultural Extension lacks substance, logic, and more importantly a valid, factual base. His narrow and artificial viewpoint reflects a total lack of experience in adult education programs at the grass-roots level, as typified in Extension, as well as a naive glibness in accepting at face value negative verbal reports of some disgruntled individuals whose credibility in terms of experience and information base is suspect.

Another serious indictment is Ohliger's seeming tendency to take out of context the writings of people to support his case. The Miller citation is a case in point. Miller's treatise, "A National Policy for Adult Education," is for the most part laudatory of the impact that Extension has had on the education of adults in this nation. Freire's concept of Extension in Chile and Brazil cannot and should not be equated with the Extension concept in the United States. The fallacy of that assumption is that Extension programs in Chile and Brazil are for the most part, designed at the national level in a governmental agency and superimposed on the people, whereas Extension's hallmark in this nation is its strong adherence to the principle that the people (learners) must be involved in designing and implementing educational programs that will affect them at the neighborhood, community, county, and state levels. This democratic approach to programming provides the medium through which our people develop as individuals and acquire the citizenship and leadership skills needed to function in a democracy.

The positive educational impact of Agricultural Extension on the contemporary American scene is evident in every aspect of the average American's daily life. The infusion of technology through the educative process has produced the best fed, clothed, housed, and informed citizenry that civilization has ever known. These achievements were not attained through edict . . . but rather through the voluntary participation of people in educational programs designed to help them expand and restructure their knowledge base, modify their values, and acquire the skills needed to apply the newly acquired knowledge to the management of practices affecting their lives.

It is ironic that an adult educator of Ohliger's stature would attempt to write a critique of one of the nation's most effective adult education institutions (an institution about which he admits he knows little) without probing more deeply into its programs and the educational impact of those programs. Let's ask Ohliger to confine his writing to his knowledge and experience base and leave the "stone throwing" to people like Jim Hightower who is an expert at innuendo.

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I am forced to question the intent of Ohliger's article as well as the purpose the author had in mind when he wrote it. The article appears to serve no purpose with the possible exception that it causes controversy and misunderstanding for those who would not take the time to delve more deeply into the material he quotes.

I am in no position to debate whether the Extension approach, as some see it, is education or not. But, if education is that which brings about change, then Extension must certainly qualify.

I believe those who built the base legislation in the Smith-Lever Act intended that this be for the purpose of educating people both in technical and production proficiency and in the social sciences so they could adequately judge the appropriateness of the institutions they built and supported.

The Agricultural Extension programs are just one of many sources of education available in this country and thus it may appear overspecialized if it is viewed as standing alone.

The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 created the Cooperative Extension Service by which practical information could be taken from the land-grant colleges and the Department of Agriculture to the people in their local environment. It ensured the educational nature of the new agency by making it a third branch of the land-grant system. Extension thus became a unique American innovation in education.

The author and others might well spend some time reviewing the discussion and debate which accompanied the passage of the Smith-Lever Act as well as other legislation that provided the educational opportunities that exist in the United States.