



*The Forum is a place for Journal readers to express their feelings on any topic they think is important to Extension. Don't make it longer than one double-spaced page. Send to: Jerry Parsons, editor, 310 Poe Hall, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, 27607.*

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I wish to convey my deep concern and affection for the Cooperative Extension Service and its guardian, the State University.

My urgent plea is that we see clearly what our educational commitment should be, not what it has been. Let the job proscribe the program, not the program proscribe the job.

Should we be committed to: (1) bookkeeping for nineteenth century rural fundamentalism, (2) the further spread of the mindless technology of the first half of the twentieth century, or (3) the divisive rhetoric of the last half? Surely, none of these, for we are educators not advocates. We hope we're humanists first, and technologists last. Our business is people.

I would like to suggest that specialization, technology, and bureaucratization have made it impossible to solve many of our private (personal) problems without first solving our public ones.

I don't denigrate the value of subject matter. We live in an operational world created by 300 years of pragmatism. We'll continue to need more and greater amounts of subject-matter knowledge. However, the problems that plague us in contemporary society seem to have solutions that lie less with technical adoption and more with institutional adjustment. This latter area is what I define as process education.

This raises the issue of reevaluation of the role of Cooperative Extension and a land-grant university. My conviction is that the genius of the Cooperative Extension Service lies not in its clientele but in its organizational structure. The idea of free and informal education to adults is itself a great achievement. Further, to have done it as part of the land-grant university, and then to have rooted it in a local community by the use of a resident staff and citizen committees, has changed this invention from merely a great idea to a stroke of genius.

I see the demise of the power of Cooperative Extension if we continue to narrowly define our mission and fail to respond to the urgent calls for help we receive from communities every time we care to listen. If Extension doesn't rise to this call, not only will we have been derelict in our duty, but some other agency will reinvent us. Our real strength lies in 60 years of organizational know-how and the creation of an educational pipeline from college to citizen, from campus to community. We, like the rural community, face the necessity of renewal if we don't wish to decline into an under-utilized and outmoded structure.

There's a crisis in the resolution of pressing problems such as distribution of income, access to health care, rewarding and productive work opportunities, reasonably priced housing and energy, control of crime and vandalism, and an adequate public transportation system. None of these problems is beyond our society's ability to solve, yet they remain unfinished business.

A basic reason for failure lies with political institutions where the rewards are related to short-run promises rather than long-run actions. Political offices are filled for two to four years—terms too short to solve enduring basic problems. The politician who devotes his energy to working on long-run issues succeeds only in stepping on sensitive social and economic toes. The payoff for this is defeat in the next election.

This type of situation represents just one example of built-in conflict between old institutional structures for problem solving and new technological realities and accompanying social conflicts.

The public university is almost our sole source of social invention and the public education system the sole source of transmission of such inventions. There's no payoff in the private sector for investment for basic research into social and political maladjustments, nor is it to that sector's advantage to create new rules of the game that may result in a more equitable distribution of either economic or political power.

In summary, our country is in turmoil due to the fact that since World War II we've imposed a revolutionary technology in quantum leaps on social and political institutions still emerging at an evolutionary rate. If the growing tensions emerging from this situation are to be dealt with, a better informed and more sophisticated public is required. Educational efforts meeting this requirement in rural America is a prime responsibility of the Cooperative Extension Service through strengthened community development and public policy programs.