

greater awareness— extension's key to program success

Raymond T. Coward

Each year millions of adults across the country attend educational programs sponsored by county, state, and federal Extension offices. Yet, we know little about what motivates people to attend Extension programs, and conversely, why people don't attend Extension-sponsored programs. Answers to these attendance questions could provide Extension personnel with a firmer basis for making decisions on allocating limited resources, and what program impact is reasonable to expect.

The phrase "needs assessment" has become a critical addition to the program planning vocabulary of many professionals. But the demonstration of a "need" within a community doesn't assure attendance at programs. Many people need the information and don't attend, others attend but don't need the information. The motivation for attendance, and reasons for nonattendance, are complex and may not be a direct result of "need."

To gain a greater understanding of why some individuals attend, or don't attend, Extension programs, questions related to this issue were added to a large-scale survey project being conducted in Indiana. The project was funded to survey a representative sample of Indiana families to determine their perceived educational needs, educational program priorities, and program delivery preferences relative to the major instructional areas of home economics.

Indiana Survey

Three nonmetropolitan and three metropolitan areas of the state were selected for study.¹ A total of 41 of the 92 counties within Indiana were included in the survey.

Raymond T. Coward: Extension Specialist and Assistant Director for Research, Department of Child Development and Family Studies, Purdue University—West Lafayette, Indiana. Accepted for publication: May, 1978. Support for this research was provided jointly by the Indiana Cooperative Extension Service and the Purdue Institute for Family and Consumer Studies.

The project selected its sample from a list of state automobile registrations. Researchers estimated that this list encompassed 86% of the households in Indiana.² A random sample of 400 individuals from each of the 6 identified areas (total sample size=2,400) was selected. After the sample was drawn, previously established procedures for mail surveys were used with slight modifications.³

From an effective sample of 2,076,⁴ 52.1% completed and returned the questionnaire (n=1,081). Metropolitan compared to nonmetropolitan return rates were similar—50.2% and 52.1%, respectively.

The instructions accompanying the materials asked that the female head of the household or other female over 18 complete the questionnaire. When neither was possible, the instructions asked for the responses of any adult over 18. Of the returned questionnaires, 20% (n=218) were completed by males and the remaining 80% by females (n=863).

To reduce the potential variation in reasons for attendance because of sex or ethnic differences, the data analyzed were limited to the responses of Caucasian females (n=804). Although this limits the generalizability of the results, the data are still meaningful given that white females represent the bulk of individuals with whom the home economics Extension programs work.

Results

Each questionnaire contained the following statement and question:

- Thousands of Indiana residents attend educational activities sponsored by Extension each year. At the same time, thousands don't attend. Have you ever attended a program sponsored by Cooperative Extension?

Of the white female respondents, 19% (n=151) reported they'd attended an Extension-sponsored program. A significant statistical difference was found between the percentage of nonmetropolitan women who attended (24%) and the percentage of metropolitan women who attended (12%).⁵

The questionnaire also contained the following statement:

- If you answered YES, put a check (✓) next to the statements below that describe why you have attended Cooperative Extension programs. (You can check more than one.)

The statements which followed the above are shown in Figure 1. For respondents who reported they'd never attended a program sponsored by Extension, the questionnaire contained

a statement similar to the above, but asked them to check reasons why they hadn't attended Extension programs. Figure 2 shows these statements. On the average, respondents had two or three reasons for attending or not attending.

Reasons for Attending

Three of the statements from Figure 1 accounted for more than 60% of the total number of responses:

1. I like the topics of the programs—22.4%.
2. I feel a need for better information about personal and family life—21.0%.
3. I'm a member of a Homemakers Club—18.4%.

Figure 1 contains the percentage of total responses distributed by reasons.

Despite the significant differences between the percentage of metropolitan and nonmetropolitan women who attended Extension programs, the reasons that the groups reported for attending were remarkably similar. Comparisons between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan responses uncovered no significant statistical differences.⁶

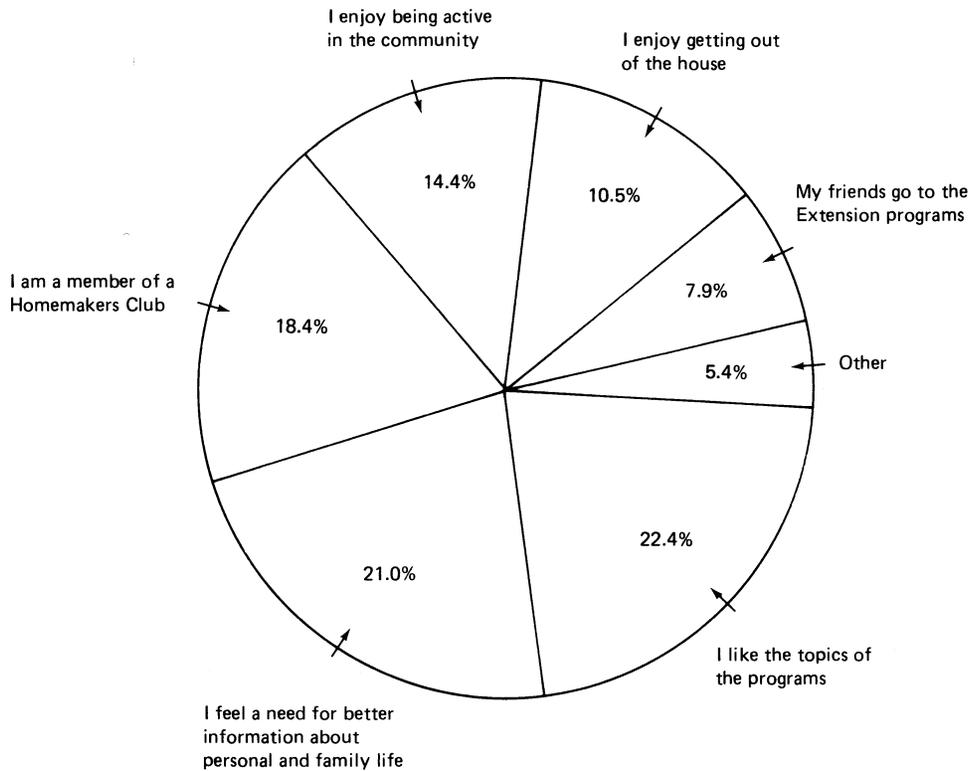


Figure 1. Percentage of total responses for attending Extension programs. (n=151, number of responses=353)

Reasons for Not Attending

The reasons reported for not attending were even more clustered. Combining the responses, 3 of the statements from Figure 2 accounted for almost 75% of the total:

1. I don't know when and where Extension programs are offered in my community—28.3%.
2. I've never seen or heard any publicity on what type of programs are offered by Extension—26.7%.
3. I don't understand what Extension is all about—19.1%.

Figure 2 contains the percent of total responses for each response category.

Despite the original metropolitan/nonmetropolitan differences in attendance rates, the reasons for not attending were remarkably similar. Comparisons between metropolitan and nonmetropolitan responses showed no significant statistical differences.

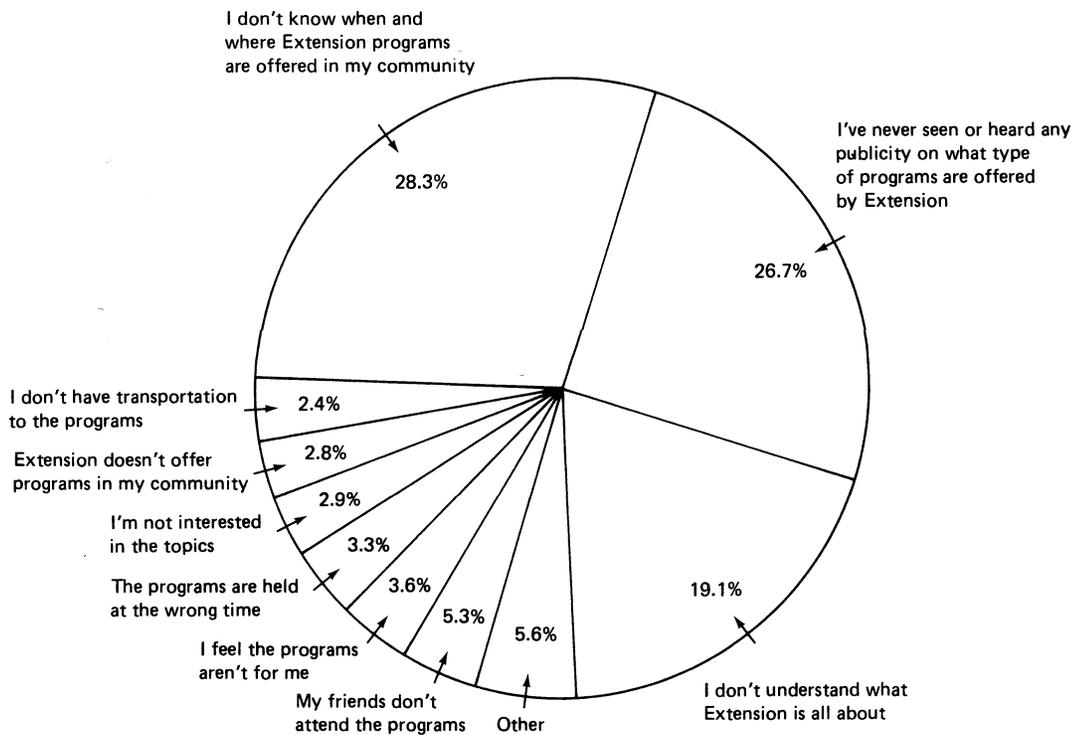


Figure 2. Percentage of total responses for not attending Extension programs. (n=653, number of responses=1,402)

Implications

These data can be seen as encouraging or discouraging—*depending on whether you see the cup as “half empty” or “half full.”* Each Extension professional must decide for him/herself whether to interpret positively or negatively the fact that almost 20% of a random sample of state residents reported they’d attended an Extension-sponsored program. Either way, however, the data support the belief that Extension’s strength remains in nonmetropolitan communities, where historically it had its origins. Extension, therefore, has a considerable challenge left to stimulate attendance in urban areas.⁷

Perhaps the most interesting and encouraging data are those related to reasons for attending, and not attending, Extension programs. The two reasons most often reported for attending seem consistent with Extension’s mandate. Extension *is* an educational program and the respondents preferred those choices that most reflected that educational intent.

. . . the challenge seems to be creating a better understanding of Extension. Extension must publicize its product! We must make the public aware of the resources available through Extension.

It’s probably unfair to label some reasons as more “right” than others, for clearly, what the survey sought was merely an accurate description of why people attend Extension programs. However, from Extension’s perspective, some of the reasons listed in Figure 1 could be described as more “desirable” because they more closely reflect Extension’s goal. From that perspective, the results of the survey are encouraging because in the sample the respondents most often picked the more “desirable” reasons for attending Extension programs.

At first glance, the reasons for nonattendance may seem discouraging. After all, no one likes to spend the time and make the commitment to community programs that so many Extension personnel do, only to discover that most state residents don’t even know what Extension is or understand what Extension is about!

On the other hand, the results can be interpreted as somewhat encouraging. In this sample, it was *not* that respondents knew about Extension, understood our purpose, and *then* rejected the programs (only 4% responded that they didn’t attend because they felt the programs weren’t for them). If this were true, it would be much more disturbing.⁸ Rather, the respondents simply didn’t know what Extension offered.

The data seem to indicate that the challenge *now* facing Extension is not so much one of making major program changes, *but more publicizing what Extension has to offer!*

The major implications for Extension of this statewide survey are briefly summarized here:

- A significantly higher percentage of women from nonmetropolitan communities reported attendance at Extension-sponsored programs than women from metropolitan areas. This seems to reflect the continued strength of Extension programs in small towns and rural communities and reaffirms the need for increased attention to programming in urban areas. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that the majority of women in both types of communities reported they'd never attended an Extension-sponsored program.
- A remarkable similarity exists between the reasons given by metropolitan and nonmetropolitan women for attending, or not attending, Extension-sponsored programs. This seems to indicate that stimulating increased attendance in metropolitan areas may not require drastically different approaches.
- The reasons for attendance most reported by the sample were highly consistent with the educational goals and mandate of the Cooperative Extension Service—respondents who'd attended had done so for the more "desired" reasons.
- The reasons reported for nonattendance reflect a clear need for Extension to "get the word out." Both metropolitan and nonmetropolitan responses indicated a significant lack of understanding and awareness about the resources and programs of Extension.

Summary

The challenge facing the Extension home economics program wouldn't seem to require major shifts in educational programming. Those who have attended Extension programs are attracted by the topics and their need for better information. Rather, the challenge seems to be creating a better understanding of Extension. Extension must publicize its product! We must make the public aware of the resources available through Extension. Then, we'll know whether the programs offered by Extension have the same appeal to others as they do those who regularly attend Extension programs.

Footnotes

1. The 6 study areas were chosen from a set of 20 sampling domains for the state previously identified by Ralph M. Brooks, Vernon D. Ryan, Brian F. Blake, and John R. Gordon, *An Explanation and Appraisal of the Methodology Used in the 1973 Indiana Community Preference Study: A Mail Survey*, Bulletin No. 53 (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University, Agricultural Experiment Station, August, 1974).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
3. The procedures, with slight modifications, corresponded to those outlined in D. A. Dillman, J. A. Christenson, E. H. Carpenter, and R. M. Brooks, "Increasing Mail Questionnaire Response: A Four State Comparison," *American Sociological Review*, XXXIX (1974), 744-56.
4. The effective sample refers to the number of people whose questionnaires weren't returned by the postal service and who, therefore, presumably could have completed and returned the questionnaire had they so chosen.
5. Differences in the distribution of metropolitan and nonmetropolitan respondents who'd attended Extension programs were tested by means of a chi-square analysis. Chi-square value equaled 16.926, $df=1$, $p < .01$.
6. Differences in the distribution of metropolitan and nonmetropolitan respondents on each reason were tested by means of a chi-square analysis. None of the probability values computed is less than .01.
7. The Extension Service is well aware of the need for innovative techniques for reaching urban audiences. The North Central Region, for example, has recently sponsored three different conferences focused on issues related to developing and delivering programs in urban communities.
8. Of course, the latter is an eventual possibility. That is, it could be that once these individuals learn about Extension programs and understand their purposes, they may still choose not to attend. That, however, is a question for future researchers.