

motherhood, apple pie, state legislators, and extension

Ralph J. Adkins

"If we do a good job, the people will support us!"
"Extension is one of the foundations of American life!"
Times have changed. Extension is no longer thought of in terms of motherhood and apple pie by state legislators. Doing a good job isn't enough. Look at recent state and federal appropriations for Extension.

The growth and success of the Cooperative Extension Service has, since its inception, been closely linked to state legislatures. State legislatures not only established Extension's partnership within the land-grant university system, but also provided the means for Extension's direct relationship to county government.¹

In the current era of increased concern for accountability, duplication of effort, and growing financial constraints, Extension must pause to examine its association with the state legislature. As Herbert Simon states: "No administrative organization can long exist without the support of the legislature."²

State of Maryland

A comparatively small state, Maryland has distinct geographical and political regions. The population of four million people is concentrated in the Baltimore-Washington suburbs and in metropolitan Baltimore. The rest of the state is predominately rural with low-density populations. The rapid suburban population growth has resulted in a shift of legislative representation. Sixty-five percent of the Maryland General Assembly now represent districts in the Baltimore-Washington complex.

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The 1979-1983 Maryland General Assembly is a new and young legislature. Seventy-five percent have served less than 10 years, while 30% are serving their first term. Twenty-eight percent are less than 40 years of age and 63% are less than 50 years old.

Maryland Study

This study was designed to determine the perception that the members of the 1979 Maryland General Assembly had of the Maryland Cooperative Extension Service. Selected personal factors were investigated to assess their impact on the legislator's perception of Extension's purpose, programs, faculty, clientele, organization, and finance.

Methodology

A stratified random sample of the 188 members of the General Assembly was taken by randomly selecting 2 legislators from each of the 47 legislative districts. This sample represented 94 legislators, 97.8% of whom participated in the study.

Each legislator was personally interviewed just before the second session of his/her four-year term. The legislators were exceptionally cooperative and willing to share their very limited time.

The data were analyzed using the chi-square test to test the significance of the relationship between the dependent and the 14 selected independent variables.

Findings

Extension Purpose. Almost two-thirds of the legislators recognized the educational responsibilities and described the Extension Service as an educational organization. Twenty-six percent had no concept of the purpose of Extension.

Agriculturists were identified as Extension's primary beneficiary by 45% of the respondents, the general public by 18%, and rural families by 10%. Again, 27% didn't know who might benefit by Extension assistance.

Extension Involvement. Over half of the legislators indicated that they'd never used any service of the Maryland Cooperative Extension Service. Twenty percent had used horticulture information, 13% had used soil testing services, and 11% used Extension as a source of general information.

There was little active participation by legislators or their families in 4-H or Homemakers Clubs. Eighty-seven percent were familiar with 4-H; however, of these, 40% didn't connect 4-H with the Extension Service.

Extension mass media efforts didn't seem to effectively generate legislative involvement or recognition of Extension programs. Fifty-four percent of the respondents had never

knowingly read an Extension news article, 69% never listened to an Extension radio program, 74% had never watched an Extension television program, and 72% had never received an Extension newsletter.

While almost half of the respondents indicated having telephoned the Extension office, very few had visited the office or had been visited by an Extension agent.

Extension Program Areas. Agriculture was the Extension program most familiar to the legislators followed by 4-H and youth, home economics, community development, and marine science. These findings are supported by Chadwick's 1966 study of Colorado legislators.³

Extension Faculty Members. Blalock's 1963 study indicated that in North Carolina contact with local staff was the most important influence in shaping the legislator's opinion of Extension.⁴ Sixty-seven percent of the Maryland legislators indicated they didn't know any Extension agents. Agents best known by legislators were ranked in the following order: agriculture agents, home economics agents, 4-H agents, and community and resource development agents.

Extension Organization and Finance. Only 13% of the legislators understood how Extension was funded. Sixty-four percent were aware that the Maryland Extension Service was part of the University of Maryland budget. Seventy-three percent, however, didn't know that agents were faculty members of the university.

Extension Clientele. The legislators were asked to give their opinion as to the amount of time and resources Extension should devote to 17 different Extension clientele groups. The five groups receiving the highest consideration were family farmers and rural youth followed by small farmers, rural homemakers, and large farmers.

Relationship with Factors Studied. The factors most frequently correlated with the Maryland legislators' perception of Extension were: (1) geographical region represented, (2) legislator's place of residence, (3) constituents represented, (4) age of legislator, and (5) race of legislator.

Those legislators representing rural areas, living in rural areas and small towns, or representing constituents from these areas were more familiar and involved with Extension work. Older legislators were more familiar with the Extension Service and were more likely to be acquainted with Extension agents. Black legislators, although not having as much understanding of Extension, placed higher emphasis on serving community organizations, limited resource clientele, and handicapped citizens than did their white counterparts.

Little or no significant relationship was observed from interaction involving role in legislature, political party, educational level, service in county government, and legislative committee leadership.

Implications

Representation in the Maryland General Assembly has shifted from the rural legislators who were and are familiar with Extension to the urban population centers where legislators have had no contact with Extension. It appears that the public relations efforts of Extension haven't kept pace with the urbanization of the General Assembly.

Extension's image is that of an educational agency for rural people. Even rural legislators, familiar with Extension, aren't aware of some of Extension's directions. These legislators must be brought along with changes in programs and direction. Extension must not get too far in front of the thinking of the General Assembly.

In the current era of increased concern for accountability, duplication of effort, and growing financial constraints, Extension must pause to examine its association with the state legislature. As Herbert Simon states: "No administrative organization can long exist without the support of the legislature."

If Extension is to become well-known in the state legislature, more effort must be devoted to reaching and involving urban and suburban legislators. Traditional mass media methods that work well in rural counties don't seem to be effective with urban legislators. Extension faculty must continue to invite legislators to attend and participate in programs. Direct contact with agents and clientele groups form the most positive perceptions of Extension.

Legislators most familiar with Extension suggest that Extension broaden its image and raise its profile. All programs offered by county faculty or state specialists must be identified as Extension Service programs. The Extension Service should look for opportunities to be of help to legislators. Both agents and specialists have technical expertise that can help solve issues facing legislators.

The legislators interviewed were anxious to be able to supply their constituents with information about Extension programs, educational materials, and resources available. The need and desire for a legislator to provide service to his/her clientele must not be overlooked.

In addition to a description of programs, the legislators were also interested in results. Annual reports would strengthen credibility and develop a mechanism for feedback with the General Assembly.

Conclusions

University administrators in their lobbying efforts must show Extension as an integral and valued part of the total university. Extension administrators should develop and maintain a personal relationship with legislators based on credibility and respect. Despite the best efforts of administration, the legislator's strongest perception of Extension will be determined by county faculty. Agents must make a conscious effort to learn about their legislators and to develop a personal acquaintance with them.

The legislators emphasized service to the same rural clientele group Extension was originally created to serve 65 years ago. Many legislators recognize the need to work with urban youth, marine programs, and community development projects, but don't realize that Extension has the capabilities to work in these areas.

One urban legislator summed it up when he said, "Extension is a lot bigger than its Green Acres image, even though most urban legislators don't realize it."

Footnotes

1. Joan S. Thomson and Emory J. Brown, "Partnerships in Transition," *Heritage/Horizons: Extension's Commitment to People*, Austin C. Vines and Marvin A. Anderson, eds. (Madison, Wisconsin: Extension Journal, Inc., 1976), pp. 57-69.
2. H. A. Simon, D. W. Smithburg, and V. A. Thompson, *Public Administration* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964).
3. Donald K. Chadwick, "Colorado Legislators' View of Extension" (Fort Collins: Colorado State University, 1966).
4. T. C. Blalock, "State Legislators' Perception of the North Carolina Cooperative Agricultural Extension Service" (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1963).