

# National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education and Economics Advisory Board

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## REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE COOPERATIVE EXTENSION WORKING GROUP OF THE NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH, EXTENSION, EDUCATION AND ECONOMICS (NAREEE) ADVISORY BOARD

Developed from Presentations and Discussions at the Spring 2012 Meeting of the NAREEE  
Advisory Board

August 27, 2012

### Introduction

The Cooperative Extension (CE) system was the focus of the 2012 spring meeting of the NAREEE advisory board. It was a fitting tribute, in light of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Morrill Act, which created the land-grant university system that serves as the home of the CE Service.

Organizationally, Extension education programs fall under the broad categories of agriculture, youth, family and consumer sciences, and community development. Within each of these categories are extension education activities that touch on every facet of life, from threats to the environment and the nation's food and fiber supply to affordable housing and human nutrition.

The CE education system is a complex entity involving the Research, Education, and Economics (REE) division of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), land grant universities in every state and territory, and a host of external partnerships. With such a wide umbrella, Extension is sometimes viewed as being "all things to all people" and having too broad a mission. The prime focus of Extension is to help people help themselves. Whether it involves agriculture, natural resources, families and communities or youth development, the mission remains the same. As the issues in these areas become more complex, the programs themselves become more diverse and complex.

The Extension division of Texas A &M University, aptly known as Texas AgriLife, together with its 1890 counterpart, Prairie View A & M University, hosted the NAREEE 2012 spring meeting. The program was developed in coordination with the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP). The session provided a thorough and interactive presentation about the role of Extension across the country, with an additional focus on Extension within the state of Texas and its impact on the local economy. Texas serves as a useful model to understand the influence and far-reaching effects of this dynamic education system in other states. As a result of these insights, the NAREEE Advisory Board offers the following recommendations regarding the future of the Cooperative Extension service:

## **Recommendations**

***Recommendation 1: USDA/REE should actively lead the effort to establish and facilitate additional extension, education, and research partnerships within USDA and with other federal departments and agencies to help people mitigate and adapt to major issues and changes in complex situations.***

Cooperative Extension has well-developed partnership models to bring research findings to the public in a manner that allows the public to make meaningful use of new knowledge. This aspect of research delivery is often the core component that other groups are simply unable to deliver with similar effectiveness across broad segments of society.

As the NAREEE Advisory Board witnessed during the Extension demonstrations in Texas, CE's extensive network makes it a key player and able partner in disaster response and emergency management at both local and national scales. In some places, Extension is also implementing educational programs to help people adapt to and mitigate major, long term perturbations like climate change, invasive plant and animals, and massive demographic shifts.

It is important that USDA/REE devote time and energy to developing and cultivating partnerships between CE and entities that can be mutually supportive in meeting the needs of people in these difficult and complex situations. Partnerships with CE are an opportunity to help other organizations leverage limited resources to meet the needs of the populations that depend on them. Without key partnerships at national, state, and local levels, the benefits of synergy between Extension and partners will not be realized.

***Recommendation 2: Cooperative Extension's base and capacity funding should be increased to expand and improve outreach efforts to underserved populations and bring new members into its network.***

The President and Congress should ensure adequate funding to support innovative outreach efforts that meet the needs of socially-disadvantaged populations across the country. This type of continuous funding is necessary for the CE system to respond rapidly to urgent needs (e.g., crop pest outbreaks, hurricanes, floods, fire and drought).

Cooperative Extension has a network and educational models to deliver transformational education to the people who need it most. However, Extension needs capacity and competitive funding, as well as full integration with research and teaching functions, to effectively extend its educational mission to underserved populations. Partners as described above should be leveraged to support capacity and augment funding.

Extension programs should have the opportunity to participate fully in competitive funding processes of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), including the Agriculture Food and Research Initiative (AFRI). Requests for applications (RFA) under REE competitive programs should invite full, integrated participation among Extension, teaching, and research components and objectives. RFAs should allow for a focus on the CE function and its complete integration with research, rather than the current perception that Extension plays a more limited role in assisting with the research function. Currently, RFAs, though they may be integrated RFAs, include focus area statements that are best described as research questions.

Panel members reviewing RFAs should reflect the integrated nature of the projects requested and funded. Review panels, particularly for integrated grants, should include members whose primary assignment is Extension. NIFA has made progress getting members who do have an Extension assignment, but it is believed that most of them have a minor assignment and behave as a researcher when reviewing proposals. NIFA should collect and report data that identifies the primary assignment of reviewers, (i.e., research, teaching, or extension) so that more balanced panels result.

***Recommendation 3: The President and Congress should expand funding for distance-delivery of CE programs to increase the number of people reached and more broadly showcase the Extension education brand. Expanded funding could increase the number of extension educators in the distance education community of practice and introduce new educational technologies, applications and tools.***

The use of communications technology, as in eXtension, has increased the number of people utilizing CE programming and the Extension knowledge infrastructure. New forms of technology allow CE to reach traditional audiences who are utilizing more modern forms of communication and to reach new demographic groups who have not utilized CE resources before. As technology advances, CE should be utilizing it to expand the capacity of its stakeholders. Without increased investments in technology, CE will rapidly lose its leadership positions. The Advisory Board recommends that USDA increase investments in eXtension and evaluate its priorities to ensure that it is meeting the needs of intended audiences.

The learner is at the center of the Extension education process. Extension education engages the learner at their current stage of knowledge and moves them through the learning process. Greater investments into new technology will more broadly employ this very effective educational model, delivering greater impact to more people.

New forms of technology will also help CE reach socially-disadvantaged populations to provide greater levels of service and support. New technology will be a key element in reaching

underserved populations and will be vital in the long term success of CE. By serving these groups, CE can provide much needed access to greater information and resources.

***Recommendation 4: USDA/REE should ensure that Cooperative Extension is an integral part of all four of the NIFA Institutes, including Food Production and Sustainability; Bioenergy, Climate, and Environment; Food Safety and Nutrition; and Youth, Family, and Community.***

Cooperative Extension can play an important role in the success of all four of NIFA's institutes. Extension education currently addresses the mission of the four institutes, but CE's actual inclusion in all four institutes would contribute to the success of NIFA's mission as well as highlight the capacity and network of the Extension education system.

## **Conclusion**

Adoption of these recommendations will enhance and broaden the impacts of Extension's unique model of education. Extension education is grounded in research-based knowledge and information. Professional Extension educators have the ability and capacity to interact with research and user communities, affecting research priorities and maximizing application of results to societal issues at the ground level.

Cooperative Extension routinely deals with problems and issues at the local level. Although regional and national programs may provide venues and focus for education activities, CE activities take place in communities, cities, and landscapes of every description across the United States. Extension's mandate is to respond to the needs of people in whatever situation or place they are located.

Cooperative Extension is the largest adult education institution in America. Its educational programs are as diverse and widespread as the mission of its federal partner, USDA. Cooperative Extension has been recognized as an effective system for lifelong informal education. It is the unique part of the land grant system which takes the learner from discovery to adoption - putting knowledge to work for people across the United States and around the world. The NAREEE recommendations are meant to acknowledge the importance of CE and to target new investments that will retain this system's leadership position and role, and enhance its effectiveness and reach.

## **Report Developed by the Cooperative Extension Working Group of the NAREEE Advisory Board**

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