

# Extension Reconsidered

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A few decades ago, Ernest Boyer (1990) argued that the dominant view of scholarship—original “discovery” research that is published in peer-reviewed academic journals—was too narrow. He believed that there were good reasons why we should reconsider it, particularly in relation to the challenge of improving higher education’s contributions to the work of understanding and addressing a host of urgent public problems. To communicate his argument and ideas, he wrote a book he titled *Scholarship Reconsidered*.

Following Boyer’s lead, in this article I argue that that the dominant view of extension—the dissemination, application, and transfer of scientific information and technologies for economic ends—is too narrow. We need to reconsider it, and the time is ripe for doing so. May 8, 2014, marks the centennial of the Smith-Lever Act, which institutionalized and provided permanent government funding for what became known as “agricultural” or “cooperative” extension. The word “cooperative” signals extension’s organizational structure as a formal partnership between the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), land-grant colleges and universities, and state and county governments.

Since it was created, extension has grown into a large and highly complex organization—or more accurately, a set of loosely coupled organizations. It is administered separately in each state by land-grant institutions, usually by a faculty member who is appointed as director. Its budget in fiscal year 2013 is almost \$2 billion. This figure includes over \$450 million from the federal government, over \$650 million from state governments, over \$400 million from county governments, and more than \$450 million from other sources. It has a staff of over 2,000 campus-based academic

professionals and more than 8,000 community-based educators who work at approximately 2,900 county and regional offices. (Data provided by the Cooperative Extension Measuring Excellence in Extension Implementation Team, Joe Zublena, Chair, North Carolina State University, November 20, 2013, based on reports from 37 institutions that obtained land-grant university status in 1862.)

The official description of extension on USDA’s website says that extension staff pursue work in the following six areas: 4-H Youth Development; Agriculture; Leadership Development; Natural Resources; Family and Consumer Sciences; and Community and Economic Development. Despite this broad range and scope of work, many people hold a narrow and, in my judgment, overly instrumental view not only of what extension has been, is, and should be, but also of what it’s for and why it matters. Consequently, as we make decisions about its future at a critical moment in history, we’re at risk of missing extension’s wider meaning, significance, and promise.

It’s not the first time this has been so. And it’s not the first time that people have argued for the need to reconsider extension. A little history will help put the present moment into perspective.

## Reconsideration in the 1980s

In 1981, the General Accounting Office (GAO) released a report titled “Cooperative Extension Service’s Mission and Federal Role Need Congressional Clarification.” There were two main motivations for drafting the report: ideological views about the “proper” role and size of the federal government, and complaints from agricultural interest

groups that extension had drifted away from its original mission and purpose. The report described extension's original purpose as "providing farmers with information from agricultural research and to encourage them to adopt improved farming methods [that contribute] to the growth in productivity and efficiency of U.S. agriculture." In their conclusion, the authors of the GAO report used a mildly scolding tone of voice that reinforced critics' claims of mission drift. And they implied that the federal government would not provide funding for anything that ranged beyond a narrow view of extension's original focus and purpose. "In contrast to its original focus on agriculture and home economics programs in primarily rural areas," they wrote,

"the Cooperative Extension Service has expanded and is now active in rural, urban, and suburban communities and offers programs in social and economic problems and cultural, recreational, and leisure-time activities. Program changes, many of which have come about in the last 20 years, have resulted in differing opinions among the Extension Service's clientele, and even within the Extension Service itself, about the scope of the Extension Service's mission. GAO believes the Cooperative Extension Service's mission needs to be reviewed and clarified, particularly in the current atmosphere of budget tightening (GAO, 1981, p. IV)."

Partly in response to the GAO report, Paul Warner and James Christenson, two rural sociologists who were then based at the University of Kentucky, conducted a comprehensive national assessment of extension. Published in 1984, their study centered on the question of what extension's role should be in the "information society of the 21st century." In their concluding chapter, the authors asked the following question: "Can an organization conceived in 1914 as a way to get farmers to adopt improved

agricultural practices continue to be relevant when it celebrates its 100th birthday?" They wrote that, in their view, it could not. But, perhaps, they suggested, part of the problem of imagining extension's future is tied to a problem with how people imagine its origins and early history. Responding to critics who were calling for extension "to return to its original purpose of serving farmers," and to people who disapproved of the expanded mission and clientele the GAO report had described, Warner and Christenson (1984, p. 126) wrote:

"Society, including agriculture, has changed, and one cannot merely "turn back the clock" to the agency's early days. Furthermore, it could be argued that Extension's early history was not at all as it is now being portrayed. Extension played a key role in improving agricultural production, but it also stressed improved utilization of resources within the family, personal development, improved quality of life, and the improvement of the total community . . ."

Rather than merely speculating about what "could be argued" about extension's early history, I want to actually make an argument. The way extension's early history has been and is most frequently portrayed—not only in various literatures but also and, more importantly, in daily institutional discourse—is too narrow and instrumental. All too often people express what I would call a comic-book version of extension's history. A history that is overly simplistic and celebratory, without any sense of ambiguity, contradiction, or failure. A history that leaves a lot out. And what it leaves out matters. It has led us to miss extension's wider cultural and civic meaning, significance, and promise—inspiring as well as troubling, and relevant not just in some distant past, but in the present as well.

I'm not just expressing my opinion. I'm offering my judgment as a

scholar. I'm reporting a finding from my research.

Drawn from discoveries I've made in my historical research, I turn now to earlier reconsiderations of extension. They show how some women and men during the first 50 years of extension's existence articulated broad views of what extension is, what it's for, and why it matters, in ways that pushed back against dominant narrow, instrumental perspectives.

## Earlier Reconsiderations

In 1927, the Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities asked the Federal Office of Education, then located in the Department of the Interior, to conduct a survey of land-grant colleges and universities. The U.S. Government Printing Office published the results of the survey in 1930 in two large volumes totaling almost 2,000 pages (Klein, 1930). In his letter of transmittal, Commissioner of Education William John Cooper noted the growth in importance of land-grant colleges as "vital factors in the agricultural, industrial, and educational progress of the Nation." But he wrote that the transformation of the nation during the time since land-grant institutions were established had made it necessary "to make a critical study of the achievements of these schools and to reappraise on a scientific basis their objectives and functions."

Extension received such a reappraisal in a section titled "Extension Services" that was included in the second volume of the survey. The following passage appears near the beginning of this section:

"The Smith-Lever Act in establishing cooperative agricultural extension work emphasized the vocational training of farm people by stating that its purpose was "to aid in diffusing among the people of the United States *useful* and *practical* information on subjects relating to agriculture and home economics and to encourage

the application of the same.” Obviously the basis of argument used by those who urged the passage of this Federal act was largely that of the great need of increasing the earning capacity of farmers through more efficient production and distribution of their products. This was the economic motive.

Accompanying this appeal, and usually used to strengthen it, was the underlying reason for desiring greater economic returns, namely, the need of changing the “standards of rural living” by providing those essentials of physical and mental satisfactions that make for richer life.

In other words, the ultimate objective was not more and better food, clothing, and housing. These were merely means and conditions prerequisite to improvement of human relationships, of intellectual and spiritual outlook. Apparent preoccupation with economic interests must be interpreted in terms of the purposes that material welfare is intended to serve.” (Klein, 1930, p. 440)

Two pages later, this passage appears:

“Broad viewpoints concerning Smith-Lever extension need special emphasis because of the practical nature of the educational “services” rendered the historical development and growth of the system, and the character of educational training and experience of many of the staff who have manned the various State extension organizations. The close relation of extension projects to the many agencies shaping the life and habits of rural people and the pressures resulting from some of these relationships make necessary adherence to sound and definite ideals, to long-time objectives, and to procedures determined by such ideals and objectives. *The fundamental function of Smith-Lever extension education is the development of rural people themselves.* This is accomplished by fostering attitudes of mind and capacities that will

enable them better to meet the individual and civic problems with which they are confronted. Unless economic attainment and independence are regarded chiefly as means for advancing the social and cultural life of those living in the open country, the most important purpose of extension education will not be achieved.” (p. 442)

Before I interpret and comment on what we see in these two passages, I want to show passages from five other works published during the same general time period. Read together, they reveal key elements of a remarkably consistent argument.

The first passage is from an article published in 1922 by M.C. Burritt, who served as director of extension at Cornell University from 1916-1924:

“Extension work in agriculture is a social and welfare movement. It is based on the idea that we are here founding a democracy; and democracy is not a form of government, but the expression of the souls of men and women....Extension work is not intended primarily to make better crops and animals, but better men and women” (Burritt, 1922).

The second passage is the opening paragraph from a book entitled *The Agricultural Extension System*, authored by two national extension leaders and published during the same year the Federal Office of Education’s survey was published:

“There is a new leaven at work in rural America. It is stimulating to better endeavor in farming and home making, bringing rural people together in groups for social intercourse and study, solving community and neighborhood problems, fostering better relations and common endeavor between town and country, bringing recreation, debate, pageantry, the drama and art into the rural community, developing cooperation and enriching the life and broadening the vision of rural men and women. This new leaven is the cooperative extension work of

the state agricultural colleges and the federal Department of Agriculture, which is being carried on in cooperation with the counties and rural people throughout the United States” (Smith and Wilson, 1930, p. 1).

The third passage is drawn from an article by R.J. Baldwin, director of extension in Michigan that was published in 1934 in extension’s national journal, the *Extension Service Review*:

“The program of extension work in agriculture and home economics for 20 years has been based on the policy of personal participation on the part of farm people in the analysis of economic, social, and other problems, and in the carrying out of the solutions of them. Through these experiences they have discovered and developed their own capacities for learning and leadership. Studying, thinking and acting together has stimulated growth, nourished initiative and inspired self-dependence. Out of their achievements in farm, home, community, State, and national programs have come much confidence, courage, and understanding. This development of people themselves, through their own efforts, I believe is the Extension Service’s most valuable contribution to society” (Baldwin, 1934, pp. 89, 95).

The fourth passage comes from a speech C.B. Smith, who served as chief of the Office of Extension Work at USDA during the 1920s and 30s, delivered at the University of Minnesota in 1939:

“Probably the biggest thing that adult Agricultural Extension and 4-H club work are doing for individuals and the Nation is not so much the growing of better crops or the rearing of better livestock or the making of better kitchens, but rather the giving of actual experience in the practice of democracy. And it has done so not by telling people about democracy or preaching about it, but by actually practicing democracy in all phases of its work and developing

its Extension program down to the smallest community and individual farm through democratic processes. And this practice of democracy in Extension since 1914 has come about because democratic processes from the outset were in the minds and hearts of those State and Federal officers administering the law and native to them” (Smith, 1939, p. 2).

The final passage comes from *The People's Colleges*, Ruby Green Smith's history of Cornell University's extension work that was originally published in 1949, and republished in a new edition in 2013:

“Extension workers need to have faith in spiritual values and to recognize the human relationships that contribute to what the ancient Greeks called ‘the good life.’ They should believe that in the kind of homes, farms, and industries which are the goals of extension service ‘man cannot live by bread alone’; that it is not enough for people to have food, shelter, and clothing—that they aspire also to find appreciation, respect for individuality and human dignity, affection, ideals, and opportunities. These are the satisfactions that belong to democratic living.” (Smith, 1949/2013, p. 544)

### **Wider Meaning, Significance, and Promise**

In my judgment, these voices and passages are not just historical curiosities. They express enduring ideals and truths that should inform and inspire efforts to reconsider extension at the moment of its centennial. As previously mentioned, they also reveal elements of a strikingly consistent argument. In essence, the argument goes like this:

*You might think that extension is a mechanism for the diffusion and application of information, methods, and technologies for economic or material ends. It is partly that. But not only, and not mainly. It's also—and most importantly—a leaven that stimulates and organizes the pursuit and practice*

*of cultural and civic values, ideals and ends, including democracy. Not democracy as a form of government, but democracy as a way of life, as something ordinary people do in everyday places. Therefore, the most important measure to use in assessing and considering the meaning, significance, and promise of extension work isn't statistical or numerical, expressed in dollars and cents or bushels or pounds. It's intangible and non-numerical, expressed in living demonstrations of leadership and growth, and in the many satisfactions that belong to democratic living: appreciation, respect for individuality and human dignity, affection, ideals, and opportunities.*

I want to stress two things about this argument.

First, it's not an oppositional either-or or zero-sum argument. It's a both-and argument. The meaning, significance, and promise of extension isn't just economic and material. And it isn't just cultural or civic. It's all of these. But while it isn't either-or, it's grounded in a judgment about what is most important. As stated in the 1930 survey, the “most important purpose of extension education” is the development of people, the fostering of “attitudes of mind and capacities that will enable them better to meet the individual and civic problems with which they are confronted.”

Second, while parts of the passages I've quoted read like reports of actual achievements, it would be naïve for us to view them as such. To do so would be to succumb to a different kind of comic-book history than the dominant one that only includes and focuses on material and economic ends. Instead, we must read and interpret these passages as expressions of aspirations that were (and are) only partially and imperfectly pursued and fulfilled. Here, I want to bring in the voice of an early extension home economics leader from Illinois, Kathryn Van Aken Burns. At the annual conference of the Association of

Land-Grant Colleges and Universities in 1937, Burns (1937, p. 51) said:

“The development and growth of home economics in the agricultural colleges brought to them an idealism and a cultural element not always recognized, as well as a new measuring stick. Heretofore, results had been largely in terms of livestock or crops; hereafter, the measure of successful agriculture was the kind of life produced. In spite of much fulsome oratory on the part of agriculture that successful living was its aim, the aim seems to have been such a remote one that provisions for bringing it about were pretty much lost sight of in carrying out the immediate objectives for improved agricultural practices.”

Reading these comments, we can begin to imagine the challenge of actually living out aspirational ideals. And we can begin to see why the authors of the 1930 survey made a point of mentioning the “pressures” extension and rural people felt from various forces and agencies—pressures that “make necessary adherence to sound and definite ideals, to long-time objectives, and to procedures determined by such ideals and objectives.”

### **The Work of Reconsidering Extension**

I want to conclude by asking how, in the context of its centennial moment, we should understand and approach the work of reconsidering extension. In my view, there are two related answers to this question.

First, we need to see and approach it as research. Not just research that is aimed at measuring impacts and outcomes, involving the establishment of relationships between variables. But also ethnographic, historical, and narrative research and inquiry that is aimed at moving us beyond comic-book depictions of extension's history—and just as importantly, contemporary practice and experience—to a more nuanced, critical,

and trustworthy understanding of extension's civic and cultural practices, impacts, meaning, significance, and promise. This has been the focus of much of my own work (e.g., Peters et al., 2005; Peters, 2006; Peters et al., 2006; Peters, Alter, and Schwartzbach, 2008; Peters, 2008; Peters, 2010; Peters, 2013a; Peters, 2013b).

Second, we need to see and approach it as deliberative choice work that engages people in weighing trade-offs between alternative courses of action (Nabatchi et al., 2012; Mathews, 2014). Such work can include public discussion of several key questions:

- What are, what have been, and what should be extension's purposes?
- What is and what has been its public value and impact?
- How and why does it matter?
- What should it do—and not do—in its second century?

There are no single, correct answers to these questions. That's because they're not about simple matters that can be definitively answered with uncontested empirical facts. Rather, they're about complicated matters about which people have reason to disagree—matters that are normative as well as empirical, with cultural and political as well as technical dimensions.

Both of the approaches I've just outlined cut against current trends and realities in extension, in higher education, and in our larger society. Qualitative research is vastly overshadowed by quantitative. Public deliberation is overshadowed by public relations, protest, and ideological posturing. A critical yet hopeful and energizing idealism is overshadowed by a pessimistic and de-energizing cynicism. And a democratic-spirited consideration of common and public interests is overshadowed by a narrow-minded pursuit of economic self-interests.

We must not let all this discourage us from taking up what can be deeply rewarding, rejuvenating, and inspiring work. We owe the women and men who came before us the effort. And we owe it to the coming generations. It is our responsibility to carry forward into its second century a flexible and dynamic organization that not only adapts its work to address the challenges of changing times, but also recommits to a broad, rather than narrow, purpose—adhering, in the words of the 1930 survey, to sound and definite ideals, to long-time objectives, and to procedures determined by such ideals and objectives.

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