Seven Reasons Why We Need Cooperative Extension in the 21st Century

by Jim Langcuster

Excuse the hyperbole, but I originally titled this document “Seven Reasons Why Extension Will Survive and Thrive (and Possibly Even Save the Planet) in the 21st Century.” While I admit that the original title would have been rhetorically overblown, I hear a ring of truth to it.

Despite the looming budget cuts and the talk of Extension’s having passed its prime, I believe that we will not only survive in the twenty-first century but we will carve out a lasting presence that will enrich millions more lives and help make the world a safer, greener, happier place.

Here are seven reasons why:

1. **We Are Sustainers**

   Sustainability is taking on new meaning. Many of the nation’s governors are using this term in these lean fiscal times to underscore why Americans must become good stewards in all facets of our lives.
   
   One example: Tightening budgetary restraints on the U.S. healthcare system are prompting more Americans to adopt lifestyle practices that safeguard against chronic disease.
   
   Meanwhile, with less cropland and water and in the midst of spiking fuel and fertilizer costs farmers are gearing up to feed a projected 9 billion people by midcentury. They are doing so even as they are being called on to develop safer, greener production systems that emphasize organically and locally grown foods.
   
   Even with online sources of information literally available at their fingertips, people can’t solve many of their problems entirely on their own. Extension is uniquely equipped to help people adopt sustainable practices in all facets of their lives.

2. **We Are Catalysts**

   One Alabama cattle producer underscored the invaluable role Cooperative Extension educators serve as catalysts—in this case, by helping him install a GPS device to reap substantial cost savings.
   
   “It’s gotten me started a little sooner than I would have,” the farmer wryly observes, admitting that it likely would have been years before he had discovered and installed the device on his own.
   
   Through the World Wide Web, farmers are as readily exposed to new ideas and ways of thinking as the rest of us, but they still need catalysts—trained experts who can see the larger picture and who can point to cost-effective solutions they otherwise would not have considered because of time constraints, professional preoccupations, or other factors.

   What applies to farmers applies to all of us.
The twenty-first century will place a strong emphasis on building technological infrastructure. Small wonder why: It offers enhanced opportunities for intellectual exchange, which in turn, creates enhanced opportunities for creativity and innovation.

Let’s not forget that we are infrastructure—not the inanimate stuff like high-speed rail or Internet connections—but the flesh-and-bone variety—human infrastructure.

Even in this wired age, enormous value remains in the dense network of face-to-face relationships that characterize the Cooperative Extension mission. Extension professionals have enormous potential for enhancing the connections that emerge from this new, technological infrastructure.

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To an increasing degree, wikinomics, which emphasizes the power of collaborative wisdom and learning, is being adopted by everyone from global companies to educational institutions.

Extension pioneers Seaman Knapp and Booker T. Washington anticipated this twenty-first-century mind-set more than a century ago: They didn’t view their clients as passive subjects; they considered them equals—more than that, they regarded them as active collaborators in their outreach efforts.

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**We Are Contextualizers**

The bad news: As flesh-and-bone knowledge providers, we cannot hold a candle to virtual knowledge sources, especially search engines—no doubt about that.

The good news is that we still possess something that search engines and other online applications lack: the ability to provide our audiences information within deep, enriched learning contexts. We help our diverse audiences not only understand knowledge within a wide learning context but also and even more important how to use it to enhance their lives in lasting, meaningful ways.

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**We Are Synergists**

Our longstanding experience with forging and cultivating partnerships among diverse groups has often enabled us to succeed where others have failed.

As our work in community resource development has underscored time and again, Extension educators have provided the crucial impetus that moves ideas from the drawing board to the assembly floor and, ultimately, to the end user.

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**We Are Collaborators**

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A Charge to Keep

I’ll close this by admitting to something—bias. I love Extension work. I feel fortunate to have served a quarter century in an agency—an educational movement—that puts knowledge to practical use.

Even in this cash-strapped era, we have a charge to keep. In the midst of this gloom, I believe that our long-standing appreciation for dialogue, our forging of partnerships, and our empowerment of people uniquely equip us for the challenges of the new century.

Note: I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the extent to which I have merely followed in the tracks of one of this century’s true visionaries: Thomas Friedman, whose observations about the flat world and all of its sundry implications provided much of the intellectual basis for this piece.