

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



Mark Smith, an Alabama Extension wildlife scientist, is working to restore river cane to Alabama landscapes to provide a host of environmental benefits on behalf of numerous species of wildlife.

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.

3

We Are an Agency of Empowerment

As *New York Times* columnist Roger Cohen soberly observed recently, the 2008 stock market downturn followed more recently by severe federal and state budgetary cutbacks have left all Americans in a “different mental place.”

Likewise, as British sociologist Anthony Giddens has stressed, policy makers in this age of austerity are placing an increasing emphasis on dialogue and empowerment, approaches that encourage individuals and groups to address change by making things happen rather than by letting things happen to them.

A preoccupation with personal empowerment will persist for a long time. The good news for us is that personal empowerment is our business. We are an agency of empowerment.

As government searches for cost-effective alternatives in the midst of these budgetary restraints, the role we serve enabling people to do more with less will garner a renewed appreciation—at least as long as we are telling our story.



Extension Urban horticulture agent Hayes Jackson uses his vast knowledge of and passion for plants to enhance the learning experiences of young people in northeast Alabama.

4

We Are Human Infrastructure



Precision farming educators Amy Winstead, regional Extension agent, left, and Shannon Norwood, former regional Extension agent, show Alabamians how to adopt technology to enhance the quality of their lives and livelihoods.

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.

“Enormous value remains in the dense network of face-to-face relationships.”

5

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.

6

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.



Extension specialist Carol Centrallo, left, and Talladega Extension coordinator Wanda Jurriaans, right, have conducted workshops and other efforts to help craftspersons, such as Jossie Morris, become successful entrepreneurs.

7

We Are Collaborators



Mathew Smidt, Extension forestry specialist, providing logger certification training at a furniture plant in Clay County, Alabama.

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.

Wikinomics is written into our organizational DNA—a trait that gives us an enormous competitive advantage over other public and private entities that are just now coming to terms with new demands of the twenty-first century knowledge economy.

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.



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