

THE USDA AND LAND-GRANT UNIVERSITY SYSTEM PARTNERSHIP IN SUPPORT OF COOPERATIVE EXTENSION: A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

*ORIGINALLY DEVELOPED BY DR. ELLEN RITTER, FORMER PROFESSOR AND HEAD, AGRICULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS,
TEXAS AGRILIFE EXTENSION SERVICE*

WHAT IS COOPERATIVE EXTENSION?

Cooperative Extension is an organizational entity of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Land-Grant University System created under provisions of the Smith-Lever Act (1914) and subsequent related legislation. Extension was created as an organic part of the Land-Grant University in each state to interpret, disseminate, and promote practical use of knowledge to improve the quality of life for all citizens.

The Cooperative Extension System is unique in structure and function. It consists of county Extension agents located in 3,000 counties across the country and Extension specialists at each state's Land-Grant University or in regional locations within the state. Local Extension agents draw upon their expertise, the expertise of specialists, and the knowledge resources of the Land-Grant University to provide information and educational programs which address local citizens' issues and problems. Extension agents and specialists are also linked in regional and national networks and the USDA. This integration of teaching, research, and public service enables the Cooperative Extension System to respond to critical, emerging issues with research-based information.

LEGISLATIVE FOUNDATION: ENABLING LEGISLATION

Cooperative Extension is a key part of the Land-Grant University System. Its foundation rests on several inter-related pieces of federal legislation:

MORRILL ACT – The Morrill Act of 1862 provided for at least one college in each state to be established where “the leading object shall be, without excluding other scientific or classical studies, to teach such branches as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts.” The federal support provided was to be the income from public lands (30,000 acres or equivalent in scrip for each representative and senator) made available to each state.

HATCH ACT – In 1887, the Hatch Act allowed for the establishment of Agricultural Experiment Stations at one Land-Grant College in each state. This established agricultural research as a recognized function of the Land-Grant University. Farmers' Institutes became one of the primary means of disseminating research findings of Experiment Stations to general audiences. Demonstrations were used as a teaching methodology, and soon “demonstration agents” were being hired with public and private funding. W.C. Stallings was the nation's first County Demonstration Agent, hired in Texas in 1906. Extension work began to flourish in many states, leading to public support for establishment of an extension system.

SECOND MORRILL ACT – In 1890 the Second Morrill Act was passed, supplementing by direct appropriation the income from the land-grants. States had to show that race or color was not a criterion for admission or designate a separate land-grant college for blacks in order to receive the money. The then-segregated Southern states thus opened or designated colleges which became known as “the 1890 Land-Grants.”

SMITH-LEVER ACT – The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 provided for mutual cooperation of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Land-Grant Colleges in conducting agricultural extension work. It specified that the work “...shall consist of instruction and practical demonstration in agriculture and home economics to persons not attending or resident in said colleges in the several communities, and imparting to such persons information on said subjects through field demonstrations, publications and other wise....”

EXTENDING LAND-GRANT STATUS – In 1972, Land-Grant College status was extended to the U.S. territories through a Special Education Amendment, and in 1994, as a provision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Reauthorization Act it was also extended to 29 Native American colleges throughout the nation.

SMITH-LEVER ACT: DEFINING THE MANDATE – While the authors of the enabling legislation for Cooperative Extension could not foresee the future, the mandates implicit within the legislation is as applicable today as in 1914:

SERVE AGRICULTURE AND THE PUBLIC – The Smith-Lever Act gave Extension a broad clientele base –“the people of the United States”—yet also specified that its programs should be concerned with “agriculture and home economics and subjects relating thereto.”

DEFINE AGRICULTURE BROADLY – The term “agriculture” was used in a comprehensive sense in the Smith-Lever Act and subsequent legislation to include producing, processing and marketing farm and forest products, plus those businesses and industries concerned with supplying the resources needs in the production and marketing process. For example, the report by Mr. Lever of the House Committee on December 8, 1913 stated: *“To teach the farmer the best methods of increasing production is exceedingly important, but not more vitally so than is the importance of teaching him the best and most economical methods of distribution. It is not enough to teach him how to grow bigger crops. He must be taught how to get the true value for these bigger crops....(The Extension agent) will be expected to give as much thought to the economic side of agriculture—the marketing, standardizing, and grading of farm products—as he gives to the matter of larger acreage yields.”*

ENHANCE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT- In the same report, Representative Lever further defined the role of the Extension agent: *“He is to assume leadership in every movement, whatever it may be, the aim of which is better farming, better living, more happiness, more education and better citizenship.”* This broad and significant leadership challenge was applied first to teaching home economics or home management to farm women, and to programs aimed at youth. The underlying mandate is to provide educational programs for individuals and families which will enhance human development and maximize the individual’s contribution to society. In this way, Cooperative Extension “clearly fits into the ranks of institutions established by the federal government to stimulate national growth by helping the individual.”

Meet Local Problems- Section 8 of the Smith-Lever Act establishes the obligation of Extension to provide

“...Assistance and counseling to local groups in appraising resources for capability of improvements in agriculture or introduction of industry designed to supplement farm

income; ...cooperation with other agencies and groups in furnishing all possible information as to existing employment opportunities, particularly to farm families....” This section establishes the need for additional assistance in areas faced with special or unusual hardships, and acknowledges Extension’s role in working with groups as well as individuals in meeting local problems.

A HISTORY OF RESPONDING TO PEOPLE’S NEEDS – Cooperative Extension has historically provided educational programs and activities at the local level which address the nation’s most important problems and issues. Examples include the following:

- **World War I** – Extension mobilized war food production efforts and stressed food production, preservation and clothing conservation projects among adults and 4 H youth.
- **1920s** – A farm depression changed emphasis from production to economic concerns, farm efficiency and the quality of rural life. Unable to hire professionals, extension called upon volunteers which stimulated rural leadership development. Extension helped farmers organize cooperatives, many of which continue to operate today.
- **Great Depression** – Extension was called upon to manage the Farm Seed and Loan Program; home economics programs helped families with self-sufficiency and stretching resources.
- **New Deal Era** – Extension became involved in the management of federal programs such as the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, Soil Conservation Service, and Farmers Home Administration.
- **1950s and 60s** – Extension promoted a revolution in agricultural production, showing farmers how to combine new technology and better farm management practices for vastly greater productivity which built the nation’s powerhouse agricultural economy.
- **1960s-** Extension initiated the federally-funded Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) to improve the nutrition and health of low-income families living in the inner cities. The program is deemed among the most successful of the “Great Society” era.
- **1970s and 80s** – Extension worked with farmers to introduce strategies for sustainable agriculture and use Integrated Pest Management to minimize conventional use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers; Extension also worked extensively with families to develop financial plans for surviving the 1980s farm crisis.

- **1990s** – Extension initiatives to improve water supply and quality, and to enhance water and air quality became even more important as rapidly urbanizing areas expanded into formerly rural lands.
- **2000s** – Extension is addressing contemporary issues such as agro-terrorism and homeland security; preventing childhood obesity; diet and health issues. While the nation's needs have changed, Extension has grown and evolved to address them. As a unique achievement in American education, the Cooperative Extension System continues its longstanding tradition of “extending the university to the people” to improve the quality of life for individuals, families and youth, agricultural producers, business and communities.

SOURCES:

This paper draws heavily from the following sources:

Report of the Joint USDA-NASULGC Study Committee on Cooperative Extension, *A People and a Spirit*, Colorado State University, Nov., 1968.

National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, *Development of the Land-Grant System: 1862-1994*, retrieved from <http://www.nasulgc.org> on September 5, 2005.

Pennsylvania State University College of Agricultural Sciences, Brief Historical Perspective of Cooperative Extension, retrieved from <http://www.cas.psu.edu/> on September 5, 2005.

Wayne D. Rasmussen, *Taking the University to the People: 75 Years of Cooperative Extension*, Iowa State University Press, 1989.

For more information on Volunteerism within Texas AgriLife, please visit:

<http://od.tamu.edu>