

Interstate Shared Expertise

Prepared by Southern Region Agricultural and Natural Resource Program Leaders

Introduction

During this year of celebrating 100 years of Extension, many have indicated that extension will be more relevant in the next one hundred years as compared to the last one hundred years. Extension has long played a leading role in helping society address challenging issues. We have provided educational programs that have continuously extended knowledge to the people. Today, specialists and county agents (faculty/educators) translate the latest scientific research, information and technology into applied and practical solutions. Society is facing some challenging, critical and complex issues. Extension has an opportunity to be the 'game changer' but only if we reflect, examine and determine ways to efficiently and effectively continue to provide new research information and be the credible resource in providing that research based information to end users so that it will shape tomorrow's world for generations to come.

In this white paper, our discussion will focus primarily on agricultural and natural resources faculty issues. However, we feel that it also could be used to examine efficiencies within family and consumer sciences, community development and even 4-H/youth program areas.

Why

Agriculture must feed an estimated 9 billion people by 2050. The land-grant university's research and extension arms have played arguably the biggest role in advancing the science of food production and fiber. In order to meet this challenge, we will need to deliver not only production information but research-based information on how to minimize our impact on our natural resources, improve our efficiency and use of water while protecting quality, provide safe and affordable food to all, improve our transportation of goods and services while reducing carbon footprint, gain public support of new technologies such as genetic modified crops, improve pest management options through sustainable and safe systems, combat invasive species introduction, provide renewable cost effective energy, provide for sustainable food production and living through local food initiatives, and a host of others. Yet, as we face the formidable task of feeding 9 billion people in the world, our land-grant institutions are facing continued reductions in resources, both money and people. Steep funding cuts are occurring at a time when US agriculture is in dire need of new scientific insights and educational outreach to overcome these critical challenges. We have lost critical mass in applied research and extension at our land-grant institutions throughout the country. The outlook for increased funding from traditional sources seems doubtful. We must re-think our approaches to create and provide research based information; provide access to new technologies for agricultural production; and provide the information and services to our stakeholders, public and decision makers so that informed decisions can be made now and for the future. We must re-think our approaches to creating and providing that applied science based information to clientele.

Traditionally, our universities have competed for the best faculty in many common subject matter areas. Those faculty have brought prestige to our institutions and help define who we

are to our clientele. Any agreement to share faculty is a fundamental change in that tradition. The very fact of sharing implies that a shared faculty member is a compromise that will include some advantages but may fall short of our traditional concepts of ideal. We must guard against this concept and 'sell' the advantages to internal and external collaborators. Obviously, to enter into such an agreement, all parties must have realistic expectations that the agreement will be mutually beneficial. We must examine each position that will be shared as to the benefits of effectiveness and efficiencies that each institution will gain not only with respect to that individual position, but to each institution in terms of overall efficiencies. For example, sharing positions would allow each institution to re-direct resources for other emerging issues, higher priority faculty hiring, programmatic development, professional development, etc. that would not be available if we stay the course. In today's world there is no need to 'reinvent the wheel' at each institution especially when efficiencies are to be gained.

Within this increasingly interconnected nation and world, there are many reasons why shared expertise presents a viable alternative. The growing rates of interconnectivity brought on by digitization are rendering state boundaries somewhat superfluous. Producers are using social media to interact and compare notes with other growers in other parts of their region and nation and, in an increasing number of cases, throughout the world. In many cases, their understanding of the demands of their profession and their standing within the global economy is arguably as well-informed, if not better informed, than many of the state subject-matter specialists charged with serving them. Under the circumstances, what should prevent Extension specialists from working across state boundaries?

Guiding Principles

Planning: Interest in shared specialist agreements has normally come about as the result of financial stress coupled with strong clientele demand. Typically, this interest has occurred when there has been a critical vacancy. While we may not always be able to plan for shared expertise years in advance of their need, we feel that communication and planning would allow us to have some logical arrangements in place if we share current and anticipated needs. We would suggest a list of potential shared positions be developed and periodically reviewed among the directors and program leaders. Not all shared specialist positions need to come about as the result of vacancies. It is possible and would be prudent to also look at sharing existing resources.

Compensation: There are numerous ways in which compensation for faculty services could be structured and a single, consistent model would probably doom the practice to failure. Therefore, there must be flexibility in how each specific arrangement is defined. However, we believe there are some components of such arrangements that would consistently add value.

To avoid conflicting tenure and promotion systems, employee benefits systems and university policies, we feel that one university must be the official employer and duties at the other university or universities, should be spelled out in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) agreed upon by all parties.

A participating university should not be obligated in a situation that fails to be beneficial. There should be an exit strategy spelled out in the MOU that allows a participant to terminate the agreement with notification of other parties within an agreed upon timeframe. This of course has implications for the home university if they are left with total faculty compensation and support. For protection from such situations, the home university may want to consider language in the shared faculty member's contract that states "continued employment is contingent upon continued external funding". It is inherent in home university/MOU agreements that the home university assumes the most risk and has a vested interest in making sure that other participating universities continue to be satisfied with the arrangement.

Reporting: We feel it is critical to have clear reporting lines at each participating university, not just the home university. Administration of each university should know what they are getting for their investment and be included in a joint performance evaluation process. Roles, responsibilities and expectations of accountability should be clearly explained in the MOU and the MOU should be regularly reviewed and edited to reflect any changes. Program planning, reporting of accomplishments and impacts for each university are critical, even though reporting mechanisms and procedures may vary. Some percentage of the specialist's time expenditures will probably be beneficial to all participating universities, but accountability as to approximate percentage of time spent on activities that benefit a single university will be equally important.

Operational funding: Salary and benefits are not the only costs that must be shared. Given the increased geographical area of responsibility, there must be a reasonable consideration of travel expectations and travel funds. Access to university vehicles may be an issue to consider. Other operating expenses may be critical issues depending upon the assignment. Technicians, cell phones and access to technologies need to be considered. Shared expertise must have the available technologies to communicate with external and internal stakeholders particularly county faculty/educators and clientele. In some cases, in-kind contributions from one institution may make more sense than cash transfers between states.

Communications: In order for these shared specialist agreements to succeed, the clientele (internal and external) of each participating university must understand that their land grant university is providing the services of that specialist. Therefore, there must be some degree of joint marketing. The specialist needs to show up with the 'right' logos indicative of the institution. Consistent branding or co-branding is a must. Jointly funded specialists should ideally use letterhead, vehicles, etc. that are identifiable with all participating universities. This may present some challenges with our individual university 'logo police' and 'vehicle control' units. The shared positions must also examine the expectations of communications with clientele and how that is to be done. Living in an increasingly virtual world, institutions need only to make a commitment to the technology necessary for communication.

Shared Specialist Models

Regional Specialist

Under this model, multiple states in the same region agree to jointly fund a faculty position designed to support a specific topic across an entire region. Such positions are typically created by a vote of the Regional Extension Directors for a multi-year period. Regional positions are supported by an annual assessment paid by each Land Grant University in the region. A host institution agrees to house the faculty position and provide the supporting infrastructure needed for the position to operate. Salary, travel and operating funds to support the position are provided by the annual assessment. The Regional Specialist provides an annual report to all of the regional directors with the host institution making retention and raise recommendations that are voted on by the regional directors annually. An example of a regional specialist is the Regional Forester position housed at the University of Georgia.

Joint Position

In this model, the faculty position is designed, advertised and filled as a permanent position working for two institutions. Position is typically administratively responsible to the institution with the majority appointment, and the minority appointment institution transfers salary, travel and operational funding to the majority appointment institution under a long-term (i.e. ten year) contract. Faculty evaluation is jointly conducted by both institutions using the evaluation system of the majority appointment institution. Under this system salary is transferred from the minority appointment institution to the majority appointment institution at the beginning of the fiscal year. A set amount of operating and travel funding can either be transferred with salary at the beginning of the fiscal year, or travel can be reimbursed quarterly after the fact. An example of a joint position is the joint Tennessee / Kentucky Burley Tobacco Specialist position currently being filled by UT Extension.

MOU/Contract

Under the contract model, the faculty is an employee of one institution, but provides service to a second institution. Typically a memorandum of understanding (MOU) is prepared that outlines the service expectations and financial obligations and a separate contract is used to formalize the financial obligation. A percentage of the faculty member's time that will be committed to service the second institution will be outlined in the MOU. The MOU will usually cover a three to five year period (or open ended with a termination notice clause) with funding support provided via an annual contract that outlines quarterly payment of salary and travel reimbursement via quarterly invoices by the employing institution. Under this arrangement travel costs are generally reimbursed at actual cost after they have been incurred. A current example of MOU/Contract specialist support is the contracting of the UT Extension Small Fruits Specialist to provide peach and apple production support in Georgia.

Consortium

A consortium is one in which information, extension and research capitalizes on individual strengths of each cooperating institution. Services are outlined in advance and provided by the consortium for an annual fixed priced. The consortium is administered by a Steering Committee involving administrators, faculty members and one grower representatives from each state involved. The administrators on the Steering Committee also make up the Executive

Committee of the Consortium. An example of a formal consortium is the Southern Region Small Fruit Consortium. The consortium originally involved Clemson University, the University of Georgia, and North Carolina State University, and was initially established as the Southeastern Small Fruit Center in January 1999. In March 2000, the name was changed to the Southern Region Small Fruit Consortium. The University of Tennessee joined consortium as did Virginia Tech and the University of Arkansas.

There are several consortiums or groups of research and Extension workers that have formed on an informal basis. There are several examples including the Southeast Climate Consortium (1998) that formed and received earmarked USDA funding for several years but also competed successfully for external funding. This group has continued to meet twice a year, has formed an advisory council, and has been extremely successful in receiving competitive external funding long after the earmarked funding. There are also groups that have been formed by the Southern Region Agricultural and Natural Resources Program Leaders. The Southeast Vegetable Working Group annually meets and produces a vegetable pest management guide for the region. The Economic Outlook group meets annually and provides leadership for the Economic Outlook Conferences. Regardless, individual institutional commitment both at the faculty and administrative level assures the continued success of an informal consortium or working group.

Across State Boundaries: The Future

There are numerous examples of expertise that could be shared across multiple states. For example the pecan specialist in Alabama recently retired. The pecan acreage in Alabama does not justify a full time specialist but is large enough to need some support. This situation provides an ideal opportunity to partner with another state that has a pecan specialist. Multistate hires would also be appropriate to cover emerging issues that some states have no expertise to address. There are complex issues that need expertise from several areas. For example organic production, food safety issues of GMOs, animal hormones, next generation best management practices, advanced production systems, animal welfare, water quality and supply, food systems, food hubs, urban agriculture, etc. are all topics that need to be addressed by Extension but few Institutional Extension Systems have the individual capacity to adequately address these issues.

Jointly hiring a food systems specialist would enable the development of science based educational material, allow for agent training to occur on a regional basis, and increase the relevance of Extension in the 21st century as these agents would then deliver programs in their individual states. Another area that would benefit from a multi-state approach is on- farm testing. There is growing use of farm generated data which is made possible by yield monitors, on-board sensors, smartphones and on-board modems in tractors and sprayers. Interpreting this data will enable farmers to tailor production practices to their own needs. Specialists working across state lines would be in a position to better interpret this data and educate producers how to best utilize the large streams of data (so called Big Data) that is being produced. Jointly hiring an agricultural systems specialist would enable this issue to be addressed.

The use of multi-state specialists offers Extension Systems an attractive opportunity to achieve cost savings while increasing effectiveness. These multi-state specialists will be in a unique position to develop a clear understanding of what works across the region and what has only local application. The producers and clientele in each state will benefit from their insight. Most issues that Extension is dealing with have no state boundaries; they are complex issues and some are very emotional and sometime opposing views. Extension has an obligation to address these issues so that the public can make informed decisions. Sharing across state lines needs to be flexible in that one size will not fit all) and iterative. Extension needs to examine the current and future issues that our clientele will need research based information available and plan collectively how to address them in the future. This approach will be rewarded with a more impactful and relevant Extension system in the future.