

Leading Cooperative Extension into the 21st Century

Acceptance Speech for
Epsilon Sigma Phi Distinguished Service Ruby Award
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Being humble is easy when you are from Minnesota. My first thought upon learning that I'd received this award was, "They made a mistake." My second thought was, "No one else was nominated." And my last thought was to accept it and assure all the people in Minnesota, in ECOP, and the Cooperative Extension System, that it is accepted with thanks and recognition to the many people, including colleagues and friends in Epsilon Sigma Phi, who have provided support throughout my Extension career. They should have the ruby; however, I'll proudly wear their pin.

I decided to call my speech, "Leading Cooperative Extension into the 21st Century," because it is important and appropriate that the Cooperative Extension System (CES), which has helped people across the nation for most of this century, should be an educational force moving into the next. In just the past few years, we have made some dramatic changes: we have moved from a collection to a system; we have moved from autonomy to partnership; and we have moved from reactive education to educational leadership. University of Minnesota Regent Jean Keffeler said, "Change is inevitable. Organizations can choose change or they can chase it." I believe the Cooperative Extension System has decided to choose it.

Today I'll talk about three things: (1) a brief description of the Cooperative Extension System as it is now; (2) opportunities for extension educators to consider as we prepare for our future; and (3) a brief description of leadership in the next age.

What is the Cooperative Extension System?

CES is a fragile, elaborate, dynamic organization, an integral part of the 1862 and the 1890 colleges and universities, the U.S. Territories, and Extension Service-USDA, all working together toward the same mission. The national Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) in its 1990 publication, "Strategic Directions of the Cooperative Extension System," states that CES "helps people improve their lives through an educational process that uses scientific knowledge focused on issues and needs." To accomplish this vital mission, CES "is constantly changing to meet the shifting needs and priorities of the people it serves. As their needs and priorities change, program priorities, organizational structures and external relationships must change too."

Opportunities we must consider in preparing for our future

We need first, to consider our personal well-being as extension educators. This includes our belief in who we are as individuals and what we do as extension workers, and results in pride, training, and self-assurance. To be effective leaders, we must also know how to preserve our health and to build a private life.

Second, we must create a "new" Cooperative Extension System. To do this, we must believe that we are different. We must explain who we are now to others. We must act differently. We must tell people what we have done. And we must develop a culturally diverse staff to provide relevant programs to all of the people who need us.

A brief word about diversity: it means a whole shift in thinking to see the positive aspects both for the organization and for the country as we focus on a more diverse staff, clientele, and environment for Cooperative Extension. I must especially compliment the organization on its efforts to provide equal opportunity for female extension workers. While we still have a ways to go, much progress has been made in many states in this area. In the states where administration is equally represented by men and women, I perceive a much richer environment in which decision and plans are made. Think about the rich opportunities to extend this to the other areas of cultural diversity across this country as well.

Two things are critically important to helping us accomplish the goals of a "new" CES: an increased budget (marketing) and an improved product (leadership). Looking forward to these needs, ECOP, in 1991, created two complementary programs: the National Extension Initiative Network (NEIN), and the National Extension Leadership Development (NELD) program.

NEIN is an informal network of volunteers who will supplement the current support base of Extension on its program initiatives. This network will be identified and coordinated by the state Extension directors/administrators. Network members--knowledgeable about specific programs, understanding and supporting the Extension system--will be influential people who can be called on to contact key decisionmakers regularly about initiatives that the CES determines are priorities. We will be looking to this select group of volunteers to help us shape and market our product.

NELD, the "flip side" of NEIN, is the National Extension Leadership Development program, designed to prepare extension administrators for the future. This program, jointly sponsored through CES and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, has four purposes: (1) to give leaders and administrators the vision, courage, and tools to address constant change; (2) to enhance the pool of leaders available to CES; (3) to inspire greater support for the extension function among top leadership of the total land-grant university system; and (4) to help CES leaders examine and prepare CES's structure and functions to meet the future as effectively as possible. Kellogg's investment alone indicates its willingness to bet on the future of extension. I am especially pleased with NELD being developed in the North Central Region as a supplement to the national model. I think it will provide an early start in leadership for some individuals who will help CES become poised for the new century.

"Next-age leadership" describes an extension administrator who will function much more cooperatively, both within and outside a particular Cooperative Extension Service. It requires individuals who know who they are, who know what their organization is and could be, and who are willing to risk their careers to achieve that vision. No organization on earth contains a larger percentage of individuals who have the potential to be these kinds of leaders.

Cooperative Extension leadership and NELD are making a dynamic change as described from the conventional to an emerging leadership type. It takes into view a number of things:

- the role of a national Cooperative Extension System
- the role of our federal partner in Extension Service-USDA
- the role of an extension director in every state and 1890 institution
- the role of CES in the land-grant university
- a redefinition of the role of its administrative leadership
- an exponential growth in the ability of CES to become an educational leader serving the people of the United States

It is difficult to be eloquent about such a complex subject as leading CES into the 21st century. Sometimes an individual explains it better than an extension administrator could ever do. The following was written by Trish Olson, a MES county extension agent upon leaving the Minnesota Extension Service this fall:

Being an Extension Agent Means:

- driving through Minnesota and smiling as I enter the different counties, and thinking of the names and faces of my co-workers throughout Minnesota and thinking of the important work they do.
- knowing the University of Minnesota is more than a place to get a degree, but a place people rely on for information they need for their daily lives and knowing I help make that happen.
- when I see a sign by the side of the road that says, "This County's 4-H Clubs Welcome You," I really do feel welcome.

Being an Extension Agent Means:

- that each green bean and tomato call is more than a canning call, it is a food safety issue and an opportunity to educate and possibly save lives. listening to a woman living on a \$437-a-month AFDC check trying to make ends meet, when her rent is \$400 a month, and listening to her ask how to budget \$37 a month to last throughout the month for groceries. It means hanging up the phone and crying for my lack of ability to help and society's lack of understanding of her needs.

Being an Extension Agent Means:

- representing what I teach about healthy families, by balancing work, family, friends and time for me, and feeling "good" to practice what I teach. going home late in the evening, but feeling super, because a committee is committed and excited about the future of their community . . . and so am I.