

Are We Stewards?
A Perspective for the Cooperative Extension System

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1994 Ruby Lecture
Epsilon Sigma Phi
December 8, 1994

INTRODUCTION

I am humbled by the honor of receiving the 1994 Ruby Award and appreciative of the recognition you afford me and, the state Cooperative Extension system of which I have been a part. This occasion is personally special because I am following in line some of my mentors in this extension education business: Gordon Guyer; Patrick Boyle and Patrick Borich.

I selected the topic "Are We Stewards?" in part because of a recent reading of Peter Block's book STEWARDSHIP: Choosing Service Over Self Interest. But more importantly I selected the topic because of a long held belief that the people we serve or seek to reach with our extension work should be the major force influencing the nationwide Cooperative Extension System.

SETTING THE SCENE

Before pursuing this, I would like to point out that I'm making the assumption you are very knowledgeable of current trends effecting higher education and extension programming: changing demographics, levels of public and private financing, and the public perception of the value of the work we do. President Rhodes in a 1992 address to the Cornell faculty identified three trends: (a) "skepticism about and criticism of higher education have reached new levels of intensity"; (b) "societal expectations for higher education have never been greater. Among the things we are expected to take some responsibility for are: training and retraining the workforce; serving the previously underserved, from economically disadvantaged urban youth to retirees; helping solve pressing social problems, from the lack of school achievement, to drug abuse, health care, economic competitiveness, environmental protection, and international relations. Although no institution can do all these things single-handedly, they are all areas in which higher education can and must play an important role"; and (c) "higher education faces severe financial problems". The Pew Higher Education Roundtable has advances the following proposition: "The changes most important to higher education are those that are external to it. What is new is the use of societal demand--in the American context, market forces--to reshape the academy. The danger is that colleges and universities have become less relevant to society precisely because they have yet to understand the new demands being placed on them." I'm also assuming you have

heard enough about the forces of change that surround and influence how we live our lives, carry on the work we do and influence the environment in which we live. I don't mean to minimize the importance of societal trends nor forces of change but rather want to focus our thoughts on a vision of what could be with our dreams and input.

"Vision without action is merely a dream.
Action without vision just passes the time.
Vision with action can change the world"

Joel Arthur Barker

STEWARDSHIP

I've done a fair share of reading, contemplating, and discussing leadership in my tenure as a student and a Cooperative Extension professional. Carol Anderson and I authored a discussion paper on leadership sharing a set of six tenets that support Boyer's scholarship of discovery, integration, application and teaching.

Briefly, the tenets are:

1. Leadership is based on a clear set of rationally defensible values.
2. Leadership is a shared enterprise.
3. Leadership includes a willingness to take calculated risks to capitalize on new opportunities.
4. Leadership requires balancing the need for extensive participation and input against the need to make timely decisions when critical issues arise.
5. Leadership means building bridges between people and ideas. Diverse backgrounds and experiences are to be celebrated and used to create meaningful responses.
6. Leadership includes balancing often consuming demands of work, community, and family life.

How do these characteristics relate to stewardship? Webster defines a steward as one who

1. manages domestic concerns;
2. is a shop steward;
3. is a fiscal agent;
4. manages the provisioning of food and drink and attends passengers;

5. actively directs affairs or manages.

My first thought was that the first four definitions of a steward weren't a good fit. But on a second and third reading I saw that they really WERE. It all depends on your perspective!

Webster defines stewardship as "the office, duties, and obligations of a steward"; as "the individuals' responsibility to manage his life and property with proper regard to the rights of others". Block defines stewardship "as the willingness to be accountable for the well-being of the organization by operating in service, rather than in control, of those around us."

In the preface to his book on stewardship, Block identifies four elements that are essential if "genuine service is performed". They are:

1. "balance of power": people need to be involved in decision making and to act on their own choices;
2. "Primary commitment is to the larger community": the people are the customers we are in business to serve;
3. Jointly deciding a "shared purpose" and the "kind of culture this organization will become". This is working for inclusiveness and mutuality;
4. Having a "balanced and equitable distribution of rewards": all levels of the organization need to be recognized in the success of the organization.

Block's belief is for all levels of the organization to be involved in creating the product(s), or as he states it "creating its wealth and expanding its resources. He concludes his argument by stating "Without these elements, no genuine service is performed." I found myself reflecting on these ideas and incorporating them in my belief about leadership and service to and with the people.

There is general agreement among writers on leadership and management that administrative leaders have the responsibility for determining the organization's mission. The question has been raised as to whether administrative executives in governmental agencies have that responsibility since the mission of their agencies was determined by legislative mandates, judicial decisions and executive orders no matter how long ago or with what intent. (Bower) I believe administrative leaders duly appointed in the Cooperative Extension system do have responsibility for interpreting the mission in collaboration with partners of the system.

Administrators of a land-grant college or university have responsibility for carrying out the mandate entered into when the institution was granted land- grant status and updated with subsequent legislation. The initial mandate embodied a unique system of

widely accessible higher education that called for "openness, accessibility, and service to the people... ". (NASULGC)

PERSPECTIVE

My interest in stewardship centers on the people to be served. I find myself asking: what ARE we in business for? Who are the people we have a mandate to reach with our programs? What should the customers expect of us? What do we expect of ourselves? To whom are we really accountable? How do we as an organization change to do a more effective job of non-formal education? I'm afraid we have too often retreated from really coming to grips with these concerns. Instead we work on how we can be seen as more efficient and respected within the university community. We DO serve two "masters": the University and government entities that provide employment and resources, and the people of our state who want us to provide up-to-date and reliable research-based knowledge that they can use to improve their family living, businesses and communities.

Thus, the question: Are we stewards? If yes, for whom? To be a true steward means to have true regard for the rights of those we serve. The people we are in business to serve need to have input as partners into the decisions made about programs. I feel that also means they need to have real input into the research our universities do on their behalf. How assertive have we been as stewards in paving the way for this to take place? How much of the leadership rhetoric focuses on what we as professionals want to do rather than us working with the customer to develop a best fit for them? Attorney General Janet Reno recently spoke on our campus. One of her compelling messages was to "listen to ALL the people even those who disagree with you and you with them." Can we honestly say we've been doing this? For example, how is your state Extension system seeking input for the 1996-1999 plan of work?

In summary: my experiences in Cooperative Extension and study have brought me to this place in refining my beliefs related to stewardship and leadership. I believe we need to be stewards of the Cooperative Extension system, both in our state and for the nationwide system. We have obligations to both. I believe as growing professionals we need to know the history and mission of the land-grant university system and take an active role in developing its vision for the future. I believe that each of us need to initiate and engage in current dialogue with university decision makers and the public at large on the role of outreach and extension programming as an integral part of the university's mandate and mission. Finally, I believe that we as responsible next-age leaders need to set forth our own beliefs on what stewardship entails for the people we serve: our customers and program partners we also need to set forth beliefs for the organization and institution we are members of for leaders and our colleagues; and for ourselves to renew our commitment and sustain personal growth.

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