

**A Call for Visionary Leadership
Distinguished Ruby Lecture
by
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Thank you so much for this prestigious honor. The Epsilon Sigma Phi National Ruby Award is truly the greatest honor that any Extension professional could ever dream of attaining. I am deeply humbled and honored by my colleagues in Texas who nominated me. We have a wonderfully active ESP chapter in Texas that has been inspired by many dedicated leaders, several of whom have been active on the national level. People like Bonnie McGee, who is immediate past president, as well as former national presidents Meatra Harrison and Bill Braden, and others that many in the room would not remember.

I also thank all of you who had a part in my selection. I am honored to join the ranks of previous winners of this great award. People whom I viewed with "awe" during my career and who created the foundation for this great organization that we all have the privilege of serving today.

I would like to acknowledge my lovely wife, Jan, who accompanied me here today, and all my family for providing me inspiration, strength, and support over the years. We in Extension recognize the sacrifices that our families make as we pursue our careers to serve others. Often our family is our unsung hero and our greatest inspiration, but sees less of us than many of our friends and constituents. Finally, I want to thank the 1,400 employees of Texas Cooperative Extension whose extraordinary work, talents, and dedication have enabled someone like me to receive this tremendous recognition.

As most of you know, I retired from Extension 17 days ago after a career that spanned more than 35 years. From assistant county agent to director of Extension, every position I held was the best job I ever had. I truly enjoyed coming to work each day of those 35 years, although I will admit that I enjoyed some days more than others. While there were many personal rewards for my service over those years, the most significant ones actually had nothing to do with salary, plaques, or promotions. My greatest reward came in the form of the smiles, thanks, and ultimate success of the many people I had the privilege to work with over the years. As the television commercial for Master Card tells us, these rewards are truly "priceless."

I hope that current and future generations of Extension professionals experience these same rewards in their careers. A simple review by all of us of the Extension

Professional's Creed published by Epsilon Sigma Phi reminds us all that these "priceless" rewards can be realized as a result of our commitment to the core beliefs and values expressed in that document. Beliefs in people and their hopes, aspirations, and faith. Beliefs in education, lifelong learning, and intellectual freedom. And a belief in ourselves and our opportunities to make our lives useful to humanity.

A few months ago during Texas Cooperative Extension's new employee orientation, a young county agent asked some compelling questions during an open forum with administrators. They were questions that should cause us all to think. He asked, "What is the future for Extension? Will Extension still be here in 30 or 40 years so that I might hope to retire"?

My response was that our future can be significantly impacted by those of us in Extension. It depends on how well each of us individually does our job, how we listen and respond to the real issues facing our clientele, and how well we remember that we work for the people; that the people ultimately decide if we will continue to exist. But, as I pondered that question later and reaffirmed my answer as a challenge for those new employees to become great Extension educators, and as an affirmation of my belief that our future is dependent upon each of us and how we represent the Extension mission, I realized that there probably is a more specific question to ask. That question is: Do we have the visionary leadership in Extension and in this land-grant system that is necessary to carry forward our success of the last 90 years and achieve even greater success in future years?

A plan to exist 40 years from now will require much more than each individual worker expertly and precisely driving a spike in the rail. The real issue is, whether anyone knows where the rail is heading and why is it heading in that direction? In other words, do we have the visionary leadership in this organization and this great system to successfully arrive in the year 2044 and beyond?

Leadership is unquestionably the key factor in determining if Extension will be capable of synthesizing future changes in demographics, science, technology, educational models, and human needs, and then developing a very clear and specific vision for our system. We must then hire quality, competent, dedicated faculty and prepare them with the proper tools to successfully achieve that vision.

John Scharr, a political philosophy professor at the University of California-Santa Cruz, sums it up best when he says, "The future is not some place we are going, but one we are creating. The paths to it are not found but made, and the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destination."

The future for Extension is what we create through leaders who have a vision for what Extension might look like, how we will function, and how we will serve the needs of our customers. Visionary leaders must know where we are going and why we are going in that direction.

Visionary thinking has been a recognized leadership trait for thousands of years. It is supported by biblical statements such as "without vision, a people will perish." It is exemplified by our forefathers who wrote the constitution of the United States over 200 years ago based on their vision of freedom for the people. That vision was so remarkable that our constitution has withstood the challenges of time and change and is still valid today as a vision for democracy and freedom in the future.

One of the truly great visionaries of the 20th century was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In his "I Have A Dream" speech delivered in August 1963, he clearly and eloquently described his vision of a world without discrimination. A vision that even today describes our world's quest for freedom for all people. Without vision and dreams, a people, a nation, a business, or an organization has no means to create a positive future because the paths lead no where and every day there is a new path.

In the book, *Lincoln on Leadership*, Donald Phillips wrote that one of the major factors distinguishing "leaders" from "mere managers" is vision. So it seems clear that the existence and success of Extension in the next 30 to 40 years will depend upon having decision-makers and visionary leaders who have a clear, collaborated vision of where we are going and how to get there.

A positive future for Extension depends upon having more visionary leaders at all levels. It depends on us selecting individuals as director, vice president, president, or chancellor not just on their professional vita of past accomplishments, but upon the careful analysis of their visionary leadership skills. Our future depends upon the leaders of these great land-grant universities learning from Extension's past achievements, but not allowing our future success to be hampered or held hostage by the past.

We must have leaders who recognize that Extension has a broad mission to serve the educational needs of the people in various states and communities. Leaders who recognize that the changes affecting our society also impact the Extension mission. Leaders who know that the demands of our state legislators, commissioners courts, and local people expand our opportunities for educational progress beyond traditional programming efforts.

We cannot have leaders who constrain Extension to serving only production agriculture and to working only in rural areas, or who have no appreciation for the impact Extension can have on the health and nutrition of families and youth. The vision for Extension must parallel the needs of our nation; the vision must recognize both the basic, traditional needs and the ever evolving needs of our society in a rapidly changing, diverse world. We need leaders with the astuteness to recognize the value of faculty contributions to traditional needs, but also to openly reward faculty who effectively respond to the needs of our dynamic society.

John Hoyle, distinguished professor at Texas A&M University and a futurist, states very clearly in his book, *Leadership and Futuring*, that "visionaries are rare." Yet, our future

depends upon more visionary leadership in the entire Extension system, including USDA-CSREES and all components of the land-grant university system.

The risk of successful, innovative, creative, and visionary Extension educational programs reverting to mediocracy in our country is real. People placed in government and university leadership roles who are not visionary and whose only knowledge of the Extension system relates to the past can pose a threat that ultimately contributes to the demise of Extension across the nation.

The selection of individuals who lead Extension programs and who supervise the Extension director, as well as the placement of Extension in the university structure, should be among the most crucial decisions a university president or chancellor makes. Extension certainly remains the "front door" to the university for the majority of people and presents a tremendous opportunity to create a positive first impression and image of the visionary university that most presidents seek.

I think the questions asked at orientation by the new county agent also should stimulate another question. And that is, do we as a system have a clear vision for Extension nationally and how do we define excellence in Extension?

How do we define excellence in Extension to a university president, a chancellor, a dean, a vice president, or a faculty member from another college, not mention our state legislatures, Congress, and our constituents? What are the metrics that define excellence in Extension — in our programs in 4-H and youth, in human sciences, in agriculture and natural resources, and in community development, not to mention our state Extension program and our national Extension system?

Every year, various reports rank universities and academic programs within universities based on a set of common metrics. Presidents recognize these metrics and know what they must do to strive for number one. Department heads and faculty clearly understand what it takes to be the best in a particular discipline.

In Extension however, every institution and its faculty have their own personally defined metrics. There are no mutual metrics that nationally define the best, number one, or even the top 10. In my work nationally with the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, I have discovered that every Extension Director believes that his or her state's Extension program is in the top five or 10 in the country. That may be good for our egos, but it is not good for Extension. That alone may prevent many state Extension programs and even our national system from going from "good to great" as Jim Collins challenges us to do in his best selling book.

In the document, "The Extension System, A Vision for the 21st Century," we are advised to ensure that organizational decisions in the states are consistent with the 21st century vision. I think decisions must also be consistent with a national vision. The question is, what is that vision and what are the defined characteristics of excellence in

Extension that will help us and any dean, president or chancellor to know that we are working toward that vision?

Extension is one of the few nationwide organizations or businesses that does not have defined metrics for success. How can a new administrator, especially one that comes from outside Extension, have any idea of what vision he or she should have for excellence in the state Extension program if there are not accepted metrics for our national Extension system? This creates a situation where Extension often is the loser because personal visions are commonly based on the administrator's knowledge of Extension in the past or on previous experience typically in either research or teaching or totally outside the land-grant university system. If we are truly to have visionary Extension leaders and administrators who supervise Extension directors, then we should consider establishing accepted criteria and metrics that clearly define excellence in Extension.

I fully realize the risks associated with establishing metrics for our system, but we must also recognize the risks of not establishing these metrics. If one state rewards faculty for expanding Extension into the homes of millions of urban residents while another state criticizes faculty for the same work, then we are a system destined for failure. Rewarding creativity, innovation, use of technology, and the packaging of complete educational programs for diverse audiences are metrics that I have used to reward faculty in Texas.

Shortly before my retirement, I hired a new Extension specialist in accountability who has the task of determining the economic impact of the major educational programs we deliver. I anticipate that his work will help us create new metrics on the relevance of many of our programs, while helping us to thoughtfully justify programs where economic impact is difficult to assess.

I defined the metrics for Texas Cooperative Extension based on more than 35 years of experience of working in Extension. Yet I am not confident that those metrics truly support a national vision for excellence. I do recognize that some metrics are probably relevant in some states while not in others. But I believe there are enough common metrics that define excellence in the Extension system, that a clear vision can evolve and would allow anyone, internal to our system or totally outside our system, to recognize where we are going so they might establish the means to get us there. This effort would take tremendous courage on the part of ECOP and our federal partner, but without it, we are perceived not as a system, but merely as some 76 institutions all heading in our different directions.

The future for Extension is what we create. It is created by the hard work, creativity, and service attitudes of our faculty and staff. But our future is also created through the vision of leaders who strive for excellence -- excellence that we each individually define or excellence as defined by our Extension system.

John M. Richardson, a professor at American University in Washington, D.C. says "when it comes to the future, there are three kinds of people: those who let it happen, those who make it happen, and those who wonder what happened." The call for visionary leadership in Extension is a call for individuals who can create a positive future for Extension. Leaders who can create a positive future based upon the reality of constant change and the impacts of demographics, technology, science, and the ever-evolving needs of our customers.

I believe that there has never been a time in our history when Extension has been more relevant than it is today or will be through the 21st century. But our relevance can only be realized if the call for visionary leadership is answered.

Thank you again for this very prestigious honor you have bestowed upon me today and may you and our Extension system be blessed with a very long, successful future.