

2006 National ESP Ruby Award Speech
Recipient: Bonnie D. McGee

The Extension Leadership Challenge of a Changing America

Good afternoon to my Extension colleagues and friends both here in Annapolis and across the county through Centra. To say that I am honored and deeply humbled to be the recipient of the 2006 ESP National Distinguished Service Ruby Award does not come close to expressing how much I appreciate this prestigious honor. My name follows those of many outstanding Extension leaders, who over the years have made the Extension System the organization I am so proud to be a part of today.

At each step in my career, I have been fortunate to work with supportive, visionary leaders who helped me develop and grow my capabilities. There are several who really "took a chance" and I certainly want to acknowledge them here today: Maynard Heckel, Director Emeritus at the University of New Hampshire Extension, entrusted me - a 28 year old - with the state leadership of the Home Economics Program; Zerle Carpenter, Director Emeritus with the Texas Agricultural Extension Service, brought this non-Texan "foreigner" to his administrative team; and Chester Fehlis, Director Emeritus, Texas Cooperative Extension, who developed the urban initiative in Texas, asked me to give leadership to "his baby".

Two of my mentors are former Ruby recipients, and I am delighted that one of them, Chester Fehlis and his wife Jan are here today to share this honor with me. I'm sorry that my current Director, Ed Smith was unable to attend due to weather problems with travel. I really appreciate the support of my administrative colleagues.

We all know that this award reflects the contributions of many colleagues who make the recipient look good. Each of us is where we are today because someone helped us, taught us, or pointed the way and because we were surrounded with outstanding co-workers. I want to both recognize and thank the excellent colleagues I've worked with in Alabama, Colorado, New Hampshire and Texas. I am especially thankful for the Texas Urban County Extension Directors who give direct leadership to the outstanding urban programs we have in Texas, and also to the members of the Alpha Zeta Chapter who nominated me and continue to support me in so many ways.

So I am pleased to accept this Distinguished Service Ruby Award in honor of these colleagues and all Extension educators who see public service as a positive way to make a difference in the lives of people everywhere.

I know how lucky I am to have worked my entire career in jobs I truly loved. I see Extension as a kaleidoscope, where with a slight twist all the patterns change. No two days are ever the same, and to me that's pure excitement. Actually, that's puzzled my family for many years. They aren't used to seeing people enjoy work as much as I do! But I am so grateful for their love and support.

One of my sisters, Bernice Rocray of Cape Cod, Mass. is here to represent the family siblings (There are 10 of us!) along with two of my nieces, Sharon Edwards of Malvern, Pa., and Michele Rocray of Cape Cod. To make this special day even more special, I am delighted that my favorite son, Hiram McGee of Boston, Mass. is also here with me today.

I've titled my lecture today, "The Extension Leadership Challenge of a Changing America" because I believe that captures the fundamental issue faced by our organization for the future.

Today, I will identify the many changes taking place in our society. Then based on changes, I've identified - challenges leadership must address for Extension's future. Offering access to higher education for those historically deprived of that opportunity, the Morrill Land Grant act of 1862 is widely regarded as one of America's greatest contribution to the expansion of higher education, not only at home, but around the world. Combined with the 1914 Smith-Lever Act which launched the nationwide Extension system, we have opened the doors of lifelong learning to millions of people, spanning five generations of our nation's development.

Extension has succeeded admirably in meeting its legislated charge and in the process, has also established a close bond and great credibility with those it has served so ably. No doubt this relationship is a natural outgrowth of Extension's longstanding practice of involving its clientele in identifying the problems that need to be solved and in formulating the educational programs that are developed from the research and knowledge base of the university.

Looking back, it appears Cooperative Extension's role was straightforward and to a considerable degree self-limiting. Throughout most of its history, Extension was clearly viewed as the organization best equipped to attack the education problems of production agriculture and rural living. Thus, the relationship of Extension with rural America was natural and mutually rewarding, and it was, for a large part, tranquil. Each partner knew his job and did it. Each partner knew his place and stayed in it.

Now, however, a multitude of changes make the task of defining Extension's proper role in today's world a far more complex and trying one. Some changes have come subtly, some abruptly. Some have come by choice, some by legislative mandate. Extension is quite a different organism in 2006 than it was in 1914, or even in 1990. Historically, a strength of the Cooperative Extension System has been its responsiveness to changes - to the needs of people where they live and work. As Extension's leadership looks to the future, they are challenged to focus the organization to the changing internal and external environment around us.

Let me point to a few of the major internal changes that make Extension a different organism: for example,

- Geographic designations are less and less important. Rural, suburban, urban areas all need the expertise of our agents. Extension has always worked to serve people wherever they are, but as we become a more urban nation, we need to be as well known in the cities as we are in the rural communities.
- Extension is no longer confined to certain subject area. Our areas of expertise have expanded to include natural resources, financial management, youth enrichment, integrated pest management, parenting, gardening, and many more, in addition to our traditional program areas of agriculture, community development, consumer and family sciences, and 4-H & Youth Development.
- Because of the complexity of the issues being identified today, multidisciplinary approaches and off-campus or other-campus resources are needed to effectively address problems.
- The fourth internal change points out the breath of Extension's charter. Its operation complicates the task of characterizing Extension's proper role and defining its relationship to other agencies. Extension is now in competition with others operating in the same fields. We're no longer the only game in town.

Take these changes for an organization as subtle and complex as Extension, and add the external influences in our society, and Extension's leadership has an even greater challenge. For example:

- In thinking about how much has changed in just a few decades, I'm reminded of a cartoon that was in *The New Yorker* several years ago. It shows someone impatiently drumming his fingers on the top of a microwave. "Come on," the caption reads, "I haven't got all minute." It stuck with me because it says so much about innovation and our ever-rising expectations. In last year's best-selling *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century*, columnist Thomas L. Friedman freshens the argument that a strong technology base is crucial to a nation's economic performance. Our high standard of living is a direct result of the technological advances that took us from raising chickens in our own backyards to being unwilling to wait a few seconds for our coffee to heat up in the microwave!
- The class of 2006 will be exposed to more information in a year than their grandparents were in a lifetime. Just think, the number of internet connections in 1996 was 40 million, in 1997 it was 100 million, and last year it was 1 billion. I'm sure the number will just continue to grow higher each year. It has been suggested that millions of people will use a single piece of knowledge due to the different media in which knowledge is shared. However, the challenge will be in determining what is factual and what is not factual.
- The 2000 Census found that 83% of the nation's residents live in metropolitan areas. This is reflected in Texas where 20 of the 254 counties contain 81% of our state's population. And obviously we're not unique across the country. The programmatic challenge for Texas and many other states is that not only are we an urban state, but we are also a rural state.

Think of this:

- By the year 2020, demographers predict that the United States will no longer have a racial majority group. Instead, the population will be more racially diverse than at any time in history (Pollard & O'Hare, 1999). Americans are a richly diverse population, varying in ethnicity, religion, life experiences, values, and socio-economic status. The growing presence of racial minorities and women in the workplace make them the largest groups entering the workforce. Workplace diversity has moved from counting minorities to fostering environments where the talents and differences of all employees are valued and respected.
- In the book, *Redefining Urban and Suburban America*, authors Burke, Katz & Lang note that between 1970 and 2000, lower-income families became more likely to live in lower-income neighborhoods, and higher income families in higher income neighborhoods. Only 37% of lower income families lived in middle income neighborhoods in 2000, down from 55% in 1970. Middle class neighborhoods have disappeared fast in metropolitan areas, especially in cities. This trend suggests increased sorting of high and low income family neighborhoods and the disappearance of middle income neighborhoods.

Additionally,

- While the rate of children living in low income families declined during the economic boom of the 1990's, we still have one of the highest child poverty rates in the developed world. Twenty-eight million American children live in low-income families.
- According to the US Census, the percentage of Americans that speak a language other than English at home has increased in every state since 1990. Seventeen percent of the people over 5 years old speak a language other than English at home.
- Probably enough has been said about the "Baby Boomers," but with a motto of "anything is possible", it's a group Extension must look to because they are generally seen as optimistic and competitive, willing to work long and hard and have a strong loyalty to their organization. They are committed to volunteerism and are a valuable resource to our outreach efforts.

Additional external influences include the fact that:

- We are a very mobile society. As a consequence, the social scientists tell us, Americans may be less attached to the particular place in which they live. However, places where people live, as defined by social and political boundaries, still reflect a lot about their inhabitants. In choosing where they live, Americans select not just their neighbors, but also their job opportunities, their children's schools, their commute, their future home wealth, their health care, and their places of worship and congregation.
- Last month was a red letter day for America. The estimated 300 millionth American was born. The nation's sustained population growth through births and immigration, results in increased competition for natural resources, the

environment, economy, land and water use and other aspects of American resources.

We all recognize that

- There will be a lasting impact and repercussions of 9/11 and the war on terrorism. There is no question that our lives will never be quite the same.

In the face of these significant changes underway, and other changes yet to come, what should our Extension leadership be considering? What is the vision that will keep Extension viable for another 100 years?

As Will Rogers said, "Even if you are on the right track, you will get run over if you just sit there!"

A vision is a destination and it gives shape and direction to the organization's future. Knowing where we want to go as an organization is essential. In Alice in Wonderland, Alice respectfully asked the Cheshire cat, "Would you tell me please, which way I ought to go from here?" "Where do you want to go?" replied the Cheshire Cat. "I'm not quite sure", responded Alice. "Then it doesn't quite matter which way you take", said the cat.

Extension's leadership cannot be "Alice". It is imperative that our leaders be visionary and dynamic for Extension to excel as a viable, relevant, educational organization meeting the needs of its clientele and serving the public good.

I have identified six broad challenges that I see as critical to Extension's leadership as we focus on the dynamics of a changing America.

The first challenge I see is in taking the risk of implementing new and innovative programs even when traditional audiences or some of our primary supporters oppose it.

In 1990, under the leadership of Chester Fehlis, Texas Extension took the bold step of making urban programming a priority focus based on the changes taking place in our state and society. It wasn't a popular decision, but it was the right decision. The demographic data forecast a new and different Texas and America, and it was felt that if Extension was to thrive, it had to be seen as a valuable educational resource in both the urban and rural areas. This challenge for Extension leadership continues today as there has been a shift in political power to urban legislators and both the power and people are concentrated in cities and suburbs. This creates an even stronger need for solid programming in urban areas, as their impacts carry responsibility for the entire organization.

An urban focus offers new opportunities and challenges for Extension's leadership. A successful urban program requires new partnerships and collaborators are needed; brand name recognition of Extension programs; a focus on quality, research based

programs; delivery methods suited to the needs of urban learners; timely responses to clientele inquiries; bilingual staff and programs to reach the diverse audiences; and funding for research addressing urban issues.

The idea of an either/or situation with rural and urban Extension focus is not viable. Extension must meet the needs of the people wherever they live. For that to happen, human and fiscal resources must be allocated appropriately. An arbitrary split of resources won't work. We cannot just give lip service to urban outreach; Extension leadership has to actively support its efforts. I believe we can do this without alienating our long standing supporters.

The second challenge is synthesizing the changes in demographics, technology and social issues and making decisions and adjustments in our programs and faculty to adequately and positively respond to those changes.

The Extension System: A Vision for the 21st Century ECOP report cited the importance of information technology and using digital technologies and distance education to offer limitless possibilities to engage new, expanding audiences for unbiased, research-based education and information. eXtension is an excellent example of collaboration to make distance education work for the organization. Accessibility to educational information will continue to be a priority. Never before has a single innovation changed America and the developed world as rapidly as the ability to store, manipulate and transmit almost instantly large amounts of digital information. Clearly, the Extension leadership must invest in the technology that will keep the organization current and competitive.

And third is recognition of the changing demographics in America. Extension leadership must make concerted efforts to secure a diverse workforce to reach diverse audiences. Extension organizations must strive toward reflecting the demographics of their population.

Diversity will be a challenge for Extension as the face of America continues to change. These faces range from aging, rural/suburban/ native-born, mostly white and black to young urban/suburban multicultural and multilingual. As Extension chooses to actively address this changing demographic, it will be necessary to recruit volunteers from diverse social groups; extend outreach to new groups; do target marketing to specific community groups; establish strong partnerships/coalition building with diverse groups; have employees with multilingual skills; expand curriculum materials for multiple languages; and recognize and honor cultural traditions.

Extension leadership must develop recruitment, hiring, compensation and professional development strategies that will attract and retain qualified employees that will be effective in a diverse and global society.

The fourth challenge addresses Extension leaderships need to secure additional resources that will contribute to an expansion of quality programs through effective partnerships, collaborations, and new sources of revenue.

When it comes to financial resources, it's all about choice. Will we continue to be considered critical and necessary to our funders? Much effort goes into trying to increase government resources, which is important. But Extension must focus on diversifying our resources based on outstanding programs. Our leadership must be prepared to: fit revenue resources to organizational priorities; use funds to expand educational programs; maintain an unbiased approach in funded programs; charge fees for programs when appropriate; hire faculty for short term, targeted assignments; and ensure that access to programs is open to all, regardless of source of funds. Extension must direct its resources to focus on relevant issues within the evolving context of local, state, multi-state and national learning priorities.

Partnerships will be a necessity as we engage with communities, agencies and organizations that have mutual goals by sharing resources, responding to needs and expectations, and recognize and honor contributions.

The fifth challenge I see is the role and contributions of volunteers to extend program outreach must be an integral part of our leadership's strategic plan for program expansion and impact. The volunteer pool will have a new profile and it will be important to have innovative approaches for utilizing volunteers in order to engage them and meet their volunteering needs.

Volunteers have always played a key role in Extension's outreach and the role of the Master Volunteer will help agents and specialist to expand their area of impact and outreach to more and new audiences with educational information. They are the "extenders" of education at the local level. In addition, we must be open to "new" types of volunteers for Extension such as paid volunteers, short term program specific docents, and key community leaders offering advocacy and financial support for Extension.

The sixth challenge for Extension's Leadership that is see is the ability to interpret who we are and what impact we are having as an organization to clientele, supporters, elected officials and collaborators.

We have much to offer as educators, but we must also be able to effectively "tell our story" through appropriate marketing, branding, and interpretation.

Our marketing efforts not only say who we are, but should answer the question of "what difference have we made" with individuals, families and communities, in relationship to their economic and social well-being.

In the latest *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*, Dixie Crase, president of the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences, wrote a column entitled

"Bridge to the Future." She said, "We stand on the bridge between our first century and our collective future. When the Romans constructed bridges, the engineer was required to stand under the bridge when the scaffolding was removed. The engineer would be the first to know if the bridge was sound."

Extension's leadership must be able to "stand under the bridge" if they are to give the visionary leadership needed to take us through this century. They cannot just think up unique ways to leave their legacy on the organization, they must make sure that the structure is sound and supports the builders and the passengers on the bridge.

In her column, Crase goes on to say, "A man was walking down a cold windy street when he saw a sign in the window. The sign read "Homemade Bread For Sale". The shivering man thought, 'Just what I need, some hot, homemade bread fresh from the oven.'" He went into the store and ordered bread. The lady behind the counter said, "We don't have any bread." The man said, "but the sign says Homemade Bread for Sale." The lady behind the counter responded, "We don't make the bread. We just make the signs."

Will the Extension leadership make the signs, or make the bread? The answer to that question will determine if Extension has met the challenges of a changing America.

My sincere thanks for the opportunity to share these thoughts with you and for the privilege of being recognized for this prestigious honor. I look forward to continuing to work with you to serve the people and strengthen the legacy of the Extension System and Epsilon Sigma Phi.