

**2012 National Ruby Award Lecture  
Epsilon Sigma Phi National Conference  
Mobile, Alabama  
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“The Future of Extension? Promising Possibilities”  
By  
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Good afternoon Extension Colleagues. It is indeed an honor to stand before you as the 2012 Epsilon Sigma Phi Ruby Award Recipient. It is also very humbling to join the distinguished list of past recipients.

From this vantage point it is clear to me that this award does not belong to me alone, but is shared with others who have been integral to any success I have achieved. It represents the accomplishments of many. Those who mentored, coached, lead, taught, assisted, challenged, and broke barriers which made my path easier.

I want to acknowledge and thank the excellent colleagues I’ve worked with in New Mexico, Colorado, Oklahoma, Mississippi, and Tennessee. I also want to gratefully acknowledge two Tennessee colleagues who were responsible for my nomination and for their presence here today: Dr. Dena Wise and Dr. Ann Berry. To receive this award based on the nomination of my colleagues is especially meaningful. Thank you also to the UT Extension Family and Consumer Sciences faculty, staff, and agents who make me look good. Would my Tennessee colleagues please stand so that we may recognize you for your Extension work and commitment to Epsilon Sigma Phi?

I appreciate the support of my Tennessee colleagues who are here today as well as those who are at home doing our important work. Dr. Tim Cross, Dean, UT Extension, thank you for providing wonderful opportunities for my professional development and for creating an environment that fosters teamwork and values all programs. And finally, I extend a most sincere thank you to the UT Extension administrative team who has contributed to me loving my work almost every day for the past 12 years! I have been fortunate to work with outstanding colleagues and mentors while enjoying strong support from my family and friends.

My husband, Rod is here today. He has been my encourager, partner, and my most ardent supporter during this exceptional journey. A long time ago, we decided I would follow his career for 15 years, he would follow mine for 15, and then we would talk about it. This is not exactly how it has worked out, but almost! Rod, thank you for the sacrifices you made to allow me to follow my career and for always being a member of the Extension team as a volunteer. Through the years, as Rod’s career and promotions moved us several times, I was always fortunate to find an Extension position with my name on it, and thus, able to fulfill my career goal established as a seventh-grader — to work for Extension.

I am pleased to accept the Ruby Award in honor of my colleagues who work diligently to improve the lives of others all across the nation.

Today, I want to explore “The Future of Extension? Promising Possibilities”

## The Future of Extension? Promising Possibilities

- Take a brief glance back.
- Identify selected trends and shifts.
- Explore how they impact Extension.
- Discuss four promising possibilities for Extension’s future.

I will:

- Take a brief glance back at some historical highlights.
- Identify selected trends and shifts taking place in our world today.
- Explore how they have and will continue to impact Extension.
- Discuss four promising possibilities for Extension’s future.

As any good futurist knows, a look at the future first requires a backward glance. For the land-grant system, of which Extension is a part, that backward glance would likely begin with the passage of the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862. The Morrill Act is widely regarded as the impetus for the expansion of higher education, which allowed — for the first time — access to higher education for the sons and daughters of the common man. “The Morrill Act was a turning point in higher education in the United States and subsequently the world.” (Smathers

& Smathers, 2004). The second Morrill Act in 1890 provided further endowment of 17 historically black colleges and universities. The next significant land-grant legislation was the Smith-Lever Act signed on May 8, 1914, by President Woodrow Wilson which legally established the Extension service as the educational branch of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Smathers & Smathers, 2004). The collective impact of these acts has led to the United States having a more educated citizenry, allowed adoption of best practices, and fostered an environment of lifelong learning across the nation. Historically we have helped people solve problems and lead richer, more productive lives. (University of Tennessee Extension, 2010) Through the years, the conditions, topics, emphasis, and educational methods have changed, but Extension has stayed true to its mission of sharing useful and practical information with the people.

The Extension Service of today continues to be a unique system funded by a partnership of federal, state and local governments. The impact of Extension nationwide is impossible to quantify, but you don't have to search long to find people whose lives have been influenced by Extension. Approximately 16,000 Extension professionals in counties across America are teaching citizens how to have better homes, farms, and communities. Agents and faculty work together to plan, create, and conduct educational programs that provide solutions to real-life issues.

Let's take a quick look at the highlights of our heritage.



Obviously, through the years Extension has focused on the needs of the people while reflecting societal trends. Look back 100 years, and consider how many of today's businesses, industries, and conveniences were then unknown or just beginning. The list could include automobiles, aviation, petrochemicals, modern health care, and music recording, just to name a few (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005). Now, travel back in time 50 years, and visualize how many changes you would find. Can you imagine a world without laptop computers, cellphones, microwaves, modern SUVs, digital home videos, iPads, and a Starbucks and Wal-Mart on every corner? Now, in your mind travel through time to the year 2032 — a mere 20 years from today. What will our world look like? How will we communicate, travel, and learn? Where will we live? And

most importantly, do you see Extension? Let's view some trends, inventions, and applications that will likely shape our future.



It is clear that there are many trends today that are — and will continue to — impact Extension and play a role in our future. With each passing decade the rate of change has accelerated. The explosion of technology today has created challenges for Extension. How do we define our role and our clients? And can we be agile enough to remain relevant in a rapidly changing world?

Futurists often talk about the future using scenarios to describe possible, probable, and preferable futures. The premise is that no one can predict the future. Rather, one can project the future given trends of today continue without intervention. As stated by Wendell Bell (1997), "The primary goal of futurists is not to predict the future, but to uncover images of possible, probable, and preferable futures that enable people to make informed decisions about their lives." I believe this premise holds true for organizations as well. By examining current trends, we can take action today and tomorrow that will ultimately lead to our preferable future. Peter Drucker (n.d.) is quoted as saying, "The best way to predict the future is to invent it." I am proposing that all of us and our colleagues across the country need to begin inventing the future we desire — a positive, promising future!

We recently completed an Extension Strategic Plan in Tennessee which involved input from more than 3,000 stakeholders. They identified six major trends which are expected to shape our state over the next 10 years. When I began to think about the Ruby Lecture, I wondered if these same trends were applicable across the country. I did a little homework and reviewed plans of other states, discussed with colleagues nationally, and reviewed current trend data. My conclusion is that these trends are universal, and while the order of importance might vary from state to state, the priority list would remain the same.

# Major Trends

- Increasing urbanization.
- Advancing technology.
- Rising rate of obesity.
- Increasing population and diversity.
- Declining economy.
- Increasing concern for environmental sustainability.

These major trends are:

1. Increasing urbanization.
2. Advancing technology.
3. Rising rate of obesity.
4. Increasing population and diversity.
5. Declining economy.
6. Increasing concern for environmental sustainability.

These trends provide unprecedented challenges and opportunities for Extension. In current literature, this point is called the pivot, a point when companies realize they need to change course or risk the consequences (“Introducing the pivot”, 2012). I believe that Extension has reached the pivot and must now take action to change course or risk consequences in the future.

Today I want to use these trends as a backdrop for four actions I believe are imperative if Extension is to enjoy a preferable future.

# First Action

Rapidly adopt advanced technologies at all levels of the organization

**The first action is to rapidly adopt advanced technologies at all levels of the organization.**

In 1985, I negotiated for a computer on my desk; up until that day the only computers in our office were on the secretaries' desks. They were used almost exclusively for word processing. I wanted one to use for tracking 4-H project literature. Email was not part of our daily routine, and there were days that my computer was never turned on — can you imagine? Today my iPhone, which is never far from my reach, has many times more power, storage, and software than that desktop. My desktop computer today is rarely turned off; after all, I might need remote access. When I travel I take a laptop, an iPad, an iPhone, a Kindle, and a hot spot. I usually check messages on my phone just before lights out at night and right after the alarm goes off in the morning. I have Facebook and Twitter accounts, I play Words with Friends, I understand Foursquare, and I am learning Pinterest. And I don't even consider myself an early adapter! I suspect this scenario is true for many of you as well. Eighty percent of homes have computers today, more than doubled since 2000. Seventy-eight percent of U.S. homes have Internet access; there are over 5.6 billion cellphones in the world and the U.S. has more cellphones than people. Is there any doubt that technology plays a major role in our lives today? Imagine what role technology will play in 20 years.

In 2002, the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy issued a report, "The Extension System: A Vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," which detailed the importance of information

technology and distance education in offering Extension programs to both new and existing clients (Alston & Elbert, 2005). The report called for action on several fronts related to technology, including in-service training for staff, encouragement for early adapters, and partnering with others within the land-grant system to secure resources and expertise needed. The report further cited that Extension must act quickly to become successful in the online technology transfer and just-in-time learning arena. The implication seemed clear: technology advances and the shrinking digital divide in America call for Extension to incorporate digital technologies as a routine part of Extension's day-to-day operation. While one could argue that we have made great strides in adoption of technology, we have not kept pace with the adoption all around us. Certainly eXtension's arrival on the scene in 2006 increased Extension's Internet presence and has provided a framework for information transfer, professional development, and online learning. We have a good start, but there is much to do. The next decade will require Extension to be adept at both face-to-face teaching and learning, as well as online teaching and learning. Consider that our future clients will be digital natives, while most of our workforce today, preparing for that future, is made up of digital immigrants. We must move quickly to be ready if we plan to be meaningful for this new clientele.

In the October 2000 issue of the *Journal of Extension*, David King and Michael Boehlje said "Time is of essence. Economists say the first competitor in a newly defined market niche could maintain as much as 50 percent market share, leaving others to fight over the remaining available customers. Extension's 100 years of experience may give us a head start toward a successful entry into a newly defined niche of technology-mediated outreach for broader audience segments, but if we don't move quickly, others will." Those words published 12 years ago carry even more urgency today. I believe eXtension can be a valuable resource in bringing our programs to the next generation if we work today to build the offerings. We also will need to employ what is being called "blended" education, which utilizes both methods to accomplish educational objectives. In practice, this method could mean that Extension offers a face-to-face educational session on food preservation initially and then participants would complete online sessions before coming together for final hands-on class. This model is being employed frequently with university students today and by Extension to a limited degree. A blended system offers the advantage of saving time and travel, providing on-demand learning that fits the schedule of the learner while at the same time including a high touch component. It also will allow us to offer the convenience of an online component to educational sessions that are not feasible to offer exclusively online.

In order to achieve and surpass the vision outlined in the ECOP report, Extension must invest in training and development of staff at every level of the organization so they may provide excellent education using cutting-edge equipment and software. Extension will likely be required to expand staff in key information technology areas to support this critical cog for teaching and learning in the organization's promising future.



## Second Action

Expand our reach to diverse audiences

**The second action is to expand our reach to diverse audiences.**

Let's consider the continuing demographic shifts, including urbanization, growing population, and increasing diversity. Over the past several years, we have seen dramatic shifts in populations away from rural to urban and suburban areas, which pose serious threats to our promising future. Extension has historically served a rural agriculture audience. But as early as 1948, a Joint Committee Report on Extension Programs, Policies, and Goals suggested that urban audiences could not be ignored (Ratchford, 1984). Today as the number of farms decrease and more families relocate to urban and suburban areas to find employment, our traditional base of support is shrinking. We cannot ignore the urban and suburban dwellers. To enjoy our preferable future we must find ways to ensure Extension is relevant to urban dwellers and diverse audiences. In her 2006 Ruby Lecture, Bonnie McGee said, "We must be seen as a valuable educational resource in both urban and rural areas." A successful program relevant to a diverse audience will require Extension to forge new partnerships and coalitions. We will need to adjust delivery methods and meeting locations to appeal to a new audience. We will need to become proficient at online education. We may need to open storefronts in shopping malls or in retail outlets. We may need to have more worksite programs that reach people where they are during lunch or breaks. It has been my experience that if we make the case and document how our programs can likely affect the bottom line of a company, they will give us



time and access to their employees. For example, financial education and homebuyer education programs that help employees achieve and/or maintain greater financial security will often reduce absences and illnesses. Workers remain more focused so production goes up and accidents go down. I could make the same case for nutrition programs with the potential to reduce obesity and subsequently health-related issues. Employers see the value. I think programs such as these have great potential for reaching large numbers of employees with vital education as fee constructed programs.

We also must make sure that urban audiences know how to find us. Word of mouth and a sign in front of the building will not suffice. We will need to utilize mass media and social media as part of a comprehensive marketing plan to reach this new audience. According to West, Drake, and Londo (2009), "We can and must develop relevant programs and aggressively market existing programs to this emergent demographic. I am convinced that many of our programs today are relevant and important to diverse audiences and if we were more present through technology, mass media and social media, we would be overwhelmed with clients both rural and urban who are eager for solutions to their everyday problems. Aggressively marketing programs will be new territory for us as we are accustomed to our public knowing about us and valuing our programs. This is a pivot. The stakes are high; we cannot have our colleagues in 2032 repeating that 'Extension is the best kept secret.'"

Another reason for expanding programs to new, urban audiences, albeit self-serving, is the shift in political power as more and more elected officials have fewer connections to rural communities and have increasing pressure to represent the interest of the growing urban areas. As a publically funded agency, this scenario is always a concern, but with a declining economy and rising health care costs fueled by an alarming obesity rate, states will be forced to make tough decisions that consider the needs of the majority. We need to be as well-known with those from urban areas as we are with those in most rural communities. It is essential that elected officials representing urban areas know who we are and understand the impact of Extension in their local communities. Failure to develop strong Extension programs in urban areas and strengthen our relationships with elected officials representing this growing population will leave us vulnerable as our traditional base of support diminishes.

# Third Action

Document and share the impact of programs  
and the value of Extension

**A third action is to document and share the impact of programs and the value of Extension.**

Becoming more engaged and proficient with program evaluation is vital to our preferred future. Program evaluation is a broad concept that addresses the systematic study of policy, organizational structure, or programs. Evaluation study results are used to help in decisions about organization and program purposes, management, resources, methods, and clientele (Brazzel, 1983). As far back as the 1980s, there was a call for improved evaluation methods. The importance of evaluation for accountability, to inform the public and decision-makers about Extension activities and accomplishments, was stressed in the report "Extension in the '80's: A Perspective for the Future of the Cooperative Extension Service" (Brazzel, 1983). At the time, this call reflected a shift in perspective regarding evaluation. Prior to this time, most effort to evaluate programs had been to use the results to strengthen and improve Extension programs. Our efforts mostly consisted of end of session surveys completed by the participants. This method was and is a valid and necessary component of education, but is not sufficient. We must take the next steps required for accountability.

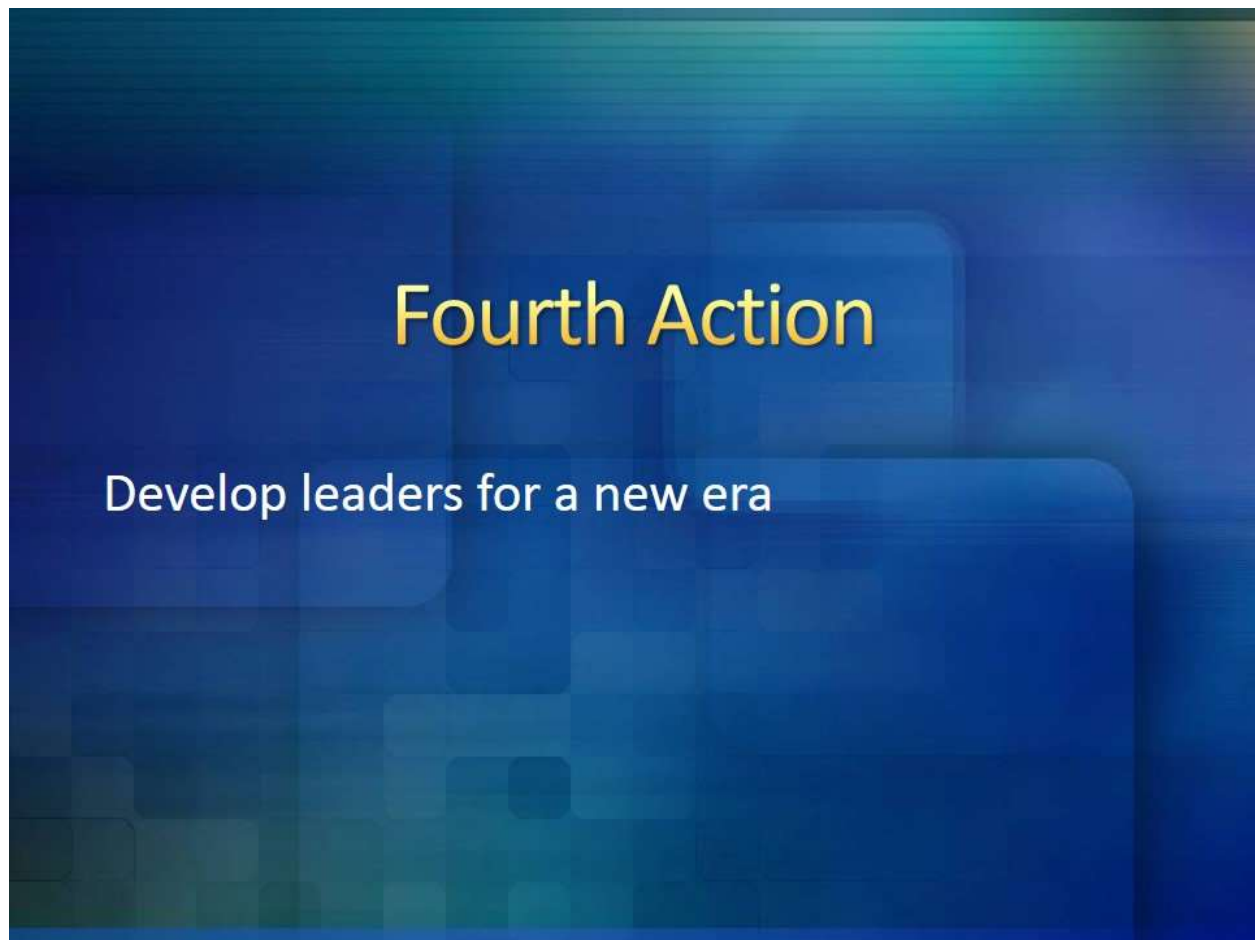
The challenge facing Extension is one of documenting the impact of programs and then communicating the worth in economic terms to the public, stakeholders, funders, and decision-makers. There was a time in our history that most people in a given community knew and valued Extension. Their programs were featured in the local newspaper, their successes

discussed on the radio and at the local coffee shop. Extension agents were key figures in the community; the impact of our work was visible and taken for granted. We believed and it was true at the time: If we do a good job, people will know it and recognition will come. However, today we can no longer count on past success, a good reputation, or doing a good job to garner support required to provide sufficient funding. In today's climate of a declining economy, rising costs, and expectation of accountability, we must be able to measure the impact of our programs. We must be able to aggregate the results to show impact at the state level and beyond. We must find ways to translate our work into economic impact to show a significant return on a taxpayer's investment. This task is not easy. Some of our programs lend themselves to quantifiable measures, but many do not. How do you measure the impact of 4-H experiences on the life of a young person? How do you measure the impact of a farm financial plan in saving the family farm? How do you put a dollar amount on the prevention of diabetes? We are making great strides in answering these and other equally difficult questions. We are making progress using impact indicators and valid, reliable instruments and methodology. For example, Texas and Tennessee and have both done outstanding work to measure and translate Extension's efforts into economic terms. However, we must expand our efforts to include more programs. We also will need to cooperate with other states to develop common indicators which will allow us to aggregate across state lines. Imagine how powerful that could be for Extension!

Another piece of this action involves the age-old debate of what constitutes excellence in Extension. We do not have nationally accepted criteria for evaluating a statewide Extension program. Over the last decade there has been much discussion, appointments of task forces, committees and commissions, and subsequent reports. Almost without exception, public universities across the country are examining ways to assess the performance of their outreach and engagement activities. Simultaneously, Extension is having discussions about performance indicators by which state Extension services might be benchmarked or compared (Rennekamp, Cummings, Feaster & Ladewig, n.d.). Each of these groups was working to assert the need for or create indicators or benchmark to document scholarly engagement. A white paper prepared by the Southern Region Indicator Work Group made this point and asked, "Will the work of Cooperative Extension be adequately represented in these metrics? What can Cooperative Extension do to ensure that its performance is measured by the "right" yardstick?" (Rennekamp, Cummings, Feaster & Ladewig, n.d.). Chester Fehlis (2004), Director Emeritus at Texas A&M University, asks, "What are the metrics that define excellence in our state and national Extension system?" Our problem is that "every institution has self-defined metrics. There are no mutual metrics that nationally define the best, or even top ten" (Fehlis, 2004) We all believe our programs are excellent and for the most part, that is accurate. In his 2008 Ruby Lecture, Gaines Smith (2008) referred to this concept and named it the Lake Wobegon syndrome.

To move past this point, it seems a logical next step would be for Extension to develop and collect data on a set of Extension-specific performance indicators and at the same time work to influence the identification of broader indicators of university outreach and engagement so that they fairly represent the work of Extension (Rennekamp, Cummings, Feaster & Ladewig,

n.d.). This work is under way in several states — Florida, Kentucky and Tennessee — to name a few, however a coordinated effort is needed and an aggressive timeline is called for if we are to have our desired future.



**A fourth action is to develop leaders for a new era.**

In last year's Ruby Lecture, Dr. Ed Smith (2011) identified 21 attributes that would be necessary to successfully lead Extension into a desired future and made the case for a professional development process to ensure we had people ready to step into leadership roles. In fact, most Ruby Lectures of the past decade and numerous other articles have mentioned the critical role of leaders in determining future success and even survival. Chester Fehlis (2004) stated, "A positive future for Extension depends upon having visionary leaders at all levels." According to Kotter (1996) in *Leading Change*, the key to creating and sustaining the "successful twenty-first-century organization . . . is leadership — not only at the top of the hierarchy, with a capital L, but also in a more modest sense (*l*) throughout the enterprise." (Kotter, 1996, p. 183).

Fehlis (2004) goes on to say that we must have leaders who recognize that changes affecting our society also affect Extension. A preferable future for Extension depends upon having visionary leaders who possess skills to navigate these turbulent times. There seems to be strong consensus that those serving in leadership roles will not only be important, but must possess

skills and characteristics that will enable them to lead in a time of unprecedented change. For we are living in a time of increasing and disruptive change, our world is filled with dilemmas, global influences, complex issues, a 24/7 flow of information, a multigenerational workforce, an integrated personal and work life, and performance goals. Traditional leadership skills won't be enough. We must have leaders who value the rich heritage of Extension but are not confined by past models. We will need leaders who are comfortable leading in a new paradigm. So what actions should we take today to meet this challenge? The first step seems to be identifying those within our ranks who have potential or expressed interest and then making sure they have opportunities for leadership development. The experience could be through a formal process such as LEAD 21 or a less formal process as mentoring and being given a statewide responsibility. It is my assertion: we need additional opportunities. At one time there was a 4-H Executive Development Institute and a 4-H Fund Development Institute and a Human Sciences Program for Emerging Leaders. These experiences prepared many people who later became state 4-H leaders, Extension program leaders, Extension directors and directors of development, or assumed other roles within the university system. I believe they made a positive impact on the entire Extension system. This cohort has or will soon retire and the programs have been discontinued. What are we doing to prepare the next generation?

Another critical step is to mentor and encourage others. Most of the leadership development opportunities in my life were suggested by my administrators and mentors. In most cases, I would not have even been aware of the opportunity if it had not been brought to my attention. Those experiences served me well and broadened my vision. I am extremely grateful for these experiences which I believe have made me a better Extension employee throughout my career.

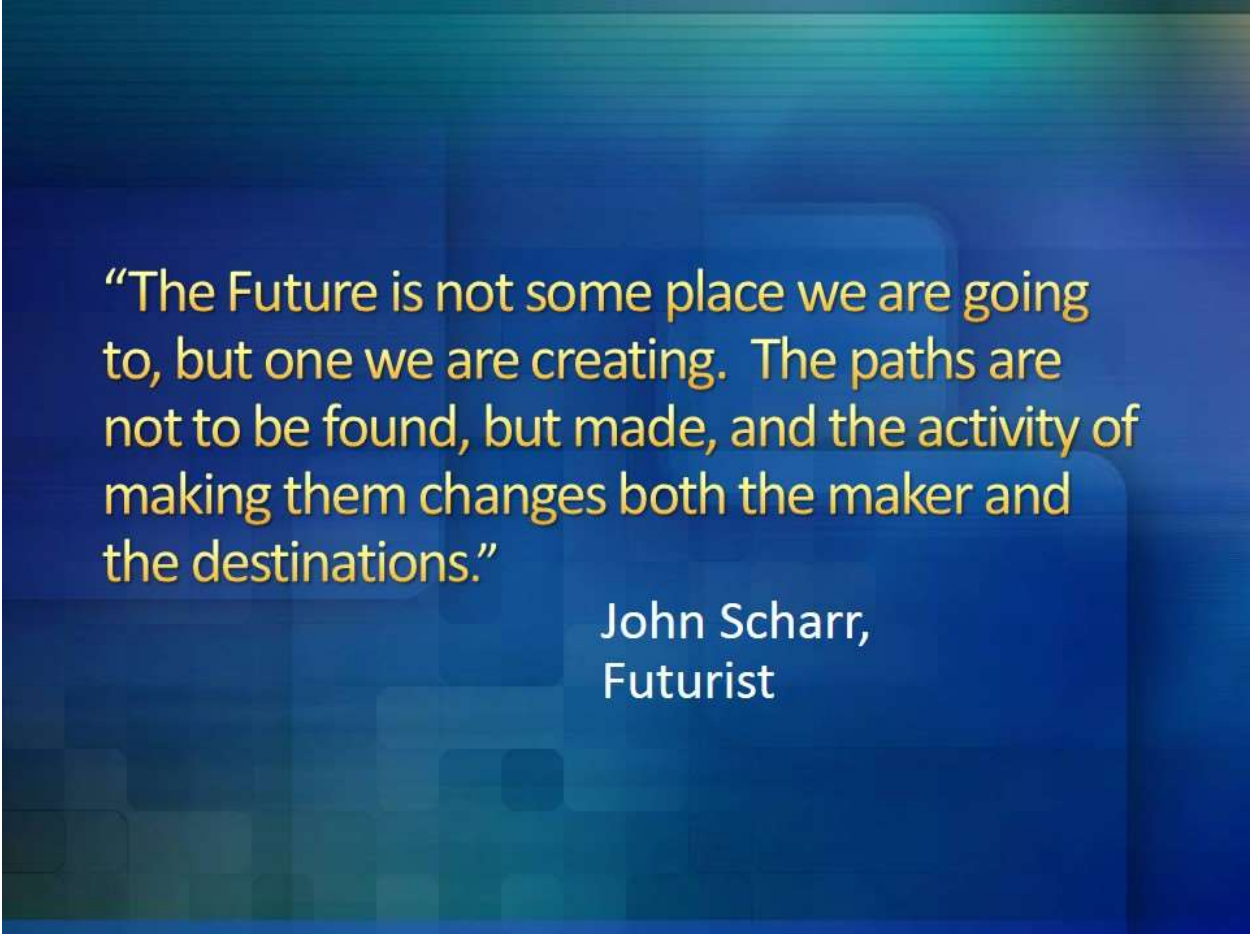
Finally, we must ensure that our employees have the credentials and experiences to obtain leadership positions within the university system. This may mean encouraging scholarship and grantsmanship long before the position is announced. It may mean encouraging someone to return to school or providing opportunities for people to obtain graduate degrees. It may mean encouraging someone to move to a different position or even to a different state. The short-term loss will be offset many times if we can prepare those with Extension experience and passion to secure administrative positions and be successful. We must keep the big picture in mind.

## **Conclusion**

The future of Extension is yet unknown and undetermined. It depends on how each of us and our colleagues respond to the challenges of today.

To ensure the future we want, each of us must take responsibility and action today. The future depends on our ability to embrace technology, to become important and essential to diverse audiences, to document and share the impact of our programs, and to prepare others for leadership roles throughout the land-grant system.

I believe the future is filled with promising possibilities that can lead to a preferable future for Extension. We must have the courage to invent the future we want. Our actions today and tomorrow will determine whether or not we have a preferable future.



“The Future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made, and the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destinations.”

John Scharr,  
Futurist

In the words of futurist John Scharr (Hempel, 1966,), “The future is not some place we are going to, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made, and the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destinations.”

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