

"Extension Professionals – the Answer People or the Question People?"

2015 Distinguished Service Ruby Lecture

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Good afternoon. It is my pleasure to be giving this year's Distinguished Service Ruby Lecture. I have been blessed with a 35 year career in Extension that gave me a variety of challenges and opportunities to learn and grown, but when I started as a program assistant in my local county Extension office in Ohio, I never dreamed I would have an opportunity like this, to be here with you today. At that time all I wanted to do was be an extension educator!

I was able to fulfill that dream, but I was very fortunate to have the challenges and opportunities that came with the other jobs in my career, jobs that let me grown and learn. But most of all, my Extension career made it possible for me to live out my passions and core values – the belief that through knowledge, challenges can be overcome and opportunities abound.

I want to thank ESP for this award – I have participated in many of these conferences over the years, and have so appreciated the opportunities for us to come together across program areas and job responsibilities. It means a great deal to me that this award comes from ESP

I also want to thank my Ohio colleagues who are here today, Greg Davis, current interim director in Ohio, and a long term colleague, Bruce McPheron, dean of the College of Food Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, who has joined us to support our Ohio Chapter here at the conference, and I especially want to thank our Alpha Eta chapter members.

This award recognizes the innovation and collaborative nature of Ohio State University Extension that is the result of their work. Much of my career was to take a concept or idea and operationalize it. I could not have been more fortunate to have worked with colleagues who would take my calls and when I would say --- so and so from this other college has an idea and is interested in working with Extension--- you interested? I would get a yes! Their commitment to focusing on community needs, to partnerships and the scholarship of engagement has made a difference in how extension is viewed across Ohio State University and the state.

As I said, it is a real honor to give this lecture – and it has been a great challenge. As people would say to me, "this speech is a chance for you to reflect on your career". Well with a 35 year career, that was a lot of reflection.

So this summer, it seemed like every walk I took, and every drive I made, I would go back to thinking about my career and the changes. I not so much thought about the changes in the organization of extension, but rather in myself, and how I thought about Extension. So let me tell you a bit about how I changed in my thinking, with some stories from my career and by sharing some of the scholarship that has impacted me over the years.

So, let's start from the beginning - I was not what we think of as the stereotypical Extension employee. I was a 3 year drop out of 4-H. I did not do my undergrad at a land-grant university, but a private school – the University of Dayton – which has as part of its 150 year mission “linking learning and scholarship with leadership and service”. And, I was going to go into another aspect of home economics until my high school teacher told me extension educators made more money!

But when I started thinking about Extension – it was the perfect match for my values, interests and career desires. Not many people end up with extension educator as their career on those career aptitude tests you take in high school – I did! So when I went to college, there was no doubt I was going to go into Extension – and it was because through extension I saw you could change the world through knowledge.

At that time – I thought that we did that through the one-way distribution of knowledge – through outreach. Extension to me was the place where you went for the answers!

As I went into Extension, and I started my career, I still remember those first questions I received and the many meetings I attended early in my career, I was focused on doing the “outreach” part of my work. Being the source of knowledge, being the expert who shared that information through programs, answering phone calls and by sharing fact sheets.

But as I progressed in my career, especially as I moved into working across the university to advance engagement, and became involved nationally in advancing scholarly engagement, I found that I could think of my job as an Extension professional in two different ways. I could focus on the outreach arm of delivering information and being the expert, or, I could focus on being a partner with my community to co-identify the problems, to co-create the solutions and to be a partner who benefited as much from the relationship as the community did. I could be focused on engagement - and that meant asking questions, usually more questions than the questions I ever had.

I want to challenge all of us to be much more intentional about being engaged in our communities. And to do that requires that we move from predominately being the answer people to focusing on being the question people, and specifically I challenge us to do that in three areas.

First of all in understanding the wicked problems in community
Secondly in using our scholarship
And finally in measuring the impact of our work

Let me explain.

First and foremost, Extension is and has always been about community and what is happening in community. In the 1990's Donald Schön, from Syracuse wrote on the reflective practitioner, and helped to shape some of my and other's thinking around University wide engagement --- where faculty from all disciplines are partnering with the public and private sector to expand the usefulness, relevance and impact in community of higher education's research, teaching and service.

In that piece, he talked about the “swampy lowlands” of daily life and challenged higher education to balance the rigor and the relevance of our work in communities. He was

referencing the wicked problems that face society – and of which universities should be tackling in communities. The concept of wicked problems was not new - Rittel and Webber were writing about them in the 1970's. And they are being discussed today. Whatever we call today's complex issues, they are like a plate of spaghetti...

--- the problem or the crisis event, is not a single strand or problem. We cannot see where the complex issue started or ends --- many different events or strands contributed to the start of the problem. We pull out one strand and everything else shifts.

Those are the types of problems and community issues we are dealing with in our states today. How many of you are working on issues like ---

Water quality

Food security and food access

The technological changes in energy extraction – many times referred to as fracking

Childhood obesity

All of these are complex issues that include multiple sciences and have ramifications on the public and private sector, individuals and policies.

But how many times do we or others walk into a community without asking the questions, without listening, without being a partner and wanting to instead come with the answers.

Addressing wicked problems starts with us asking questions, questions that help people analyze what the real problem is rather than settling on the symptoms of the problem.

We need to ask who needs to be at the table and we need to bring those perspectives together, including the voice of the community member, campus based faculty member, county educator.

We need to ask questions of our colleagues and capitalize on our program areas. What other organization in our society brings so many different disciplines together on a daily basis? Each of our program areas sees community issues from a different perspective. Do we seek out those perspectives?

Food security is a great example of that. As a family and consumer sciences person, I see it primarily from the individual/consumer perspective, with a health and/or a social service perspective. 4-H Youth Development specialist may see it from the child's perspective and the impact on the child. Agriculture may see it from the production end and availability (from a logistics perspective). Community development may look at it from a business development, policy or leadership perspective. Our challenge is to open our minds to the different perspective of our colleagues – ask questions to understand how they perceive the issues, learn from them and then work together to integrate the different perspectives to lead to innovation.

But most importantly, to address wicked problems in our communities – the core of what it means to be an Extension professional, we need to be scholars!

These two books really redefined how I thought about scholarship. Ernest Boyer's 1990 book, *Scholarship Reconsidered* challenged people to move out of the old teaching

verses research debate and move to more creative ways of thinking about what it means to be a scholar. He proposed in his book, four general views of scholarship – discovery, integration, application and teaching. Later in 1996, the scholarship of engagement was added.

This was revolutionary, and had a major impact on universities and how we thought of scholarship. It was a catalyst, along with the work of the Kellogg Foundation and their report “Returning to our Roots – the Engaged University” on redefining scholarship and also in transitioning our thought of outreach (one way directional) to engaged scholarship (that is mutually beneficial).

I then read the book *Scholarship Assessed* – where the authors, Glassick, Huber and Maeroff looked at all evidence of scholarship that we use --- research grant proposals, publications, peer reviewed presentations, creative artistic works, and asked what constitutes the standards to guide the evaluation of scholarship. The six standards they identified included that all high quality scholarship consisted of 1) clear goals, 2) adequate preparation, 3) appropriate methods, 4) significant results, 5) effective presentation and 6) reflective critique.

These two pieces – and the conversations that resulted both on our campus and nationally, shaped how I thought about Extension and our role as scholars.

Scholarship is like this lens, it allows us to focus in on a specific topic or subject and see it more clearly. It helps to channel our curiosity and inquisitiveness. That focus allows us to discover new knowledge, test existing knowledge in new situations, teach and share that knowledge and apply that knowledge. We are in the business of knowledge and scholarship which is rooted in questions....creating hypothesis and testing them – asking whether or not it is true, finding answers – but it starts first with questions.

We take this approach to our work, because our communities deserve it! They deserve that we bring the best of what we have --- knowledge and our ability to assess the knowledge --- to help address the issues.

As we work in our community around wicked problems, what does being a scholar mean in our daily work?

- Conducting the research to understand the problems and to test and understand the potential solutions.
- Being specialized and being well versed in the discipline.
- Co-creating knowledge with our community partners. Not all knowledge is housed in higher education.
- Contributing to the scholarship of engagement. How are we using our knowledge and understating of doing engagement to inform our work and that of others?
- Insure the quality of our work is of the highest quality through the peer review process. We are in the knowledge business, and the way we assess quality of our scholarly products is through the peer review of grant applications, journal articles and presentation, or assessment of our teaching and our curricular development. And there are plenty of places to share that work. Michigan State just recently did a comparison of the university-community engagement landscape before and after the 1999

Kellogg Commission report on the Engaged University. The number of journals, organizations and awards related to community engagement from then to now has tripled or almost quadrupled.

So, when I look at whether we are the answer people or the question people, we definitely are the question people when it comes to understanding the wicked problems we face in community. We need to use our inquisitiveness and curiosity that comes with being a scholar to understand both the issues and our approach to addressing them through engagement. And finally, I have seen that as extension professionals, we need to have a different scope of questions when it comes to evaluating our work in communities.

As the engagement movement has progressed, we have been challenged in higher education to be relevant, to bring value to our partnerships, to be impactful.

If as a program leader I had to read one more report on “this program resulted on x% change in knowledge” --- I am not sure what I would have done. Yes, I wanted to know what people learned, but what does that really mean?? So what?

Lets use as an example what I have learned in the last 15 years via the Internet ---- a huge competitor of ours if (and only if) we truly think of our selves as the answer people only, or a huge asset for Extension if we see it as a part (and only a part) of our total engagement portfolio!!

About 6 years ago I was redoing a bathroom at my house --- there is very little I am not willing to try – so I was going to lay the tile. I went on line and found a whole you tube channel of short videos on laying tile and every step in the process. I watched the video on laying cement board, cutting tile, grouting --- it all! If I had taken one of those pre-post tests we are so good at in Extension – my score on increase of knowledge would have made any extension educator proud! I watched the videos several times – I had it down!! I then called my neighbor and hired him to lay my tile! I did lay the cement board and grout it --- but writing that check was much faster and easier than laying that tile!

So, as a program leader, I knew that telling me someone had learned something did not tell me as much as I wanted to know. I needed to know what happened after that.

We need to start by asking the question about what people learned, and we are very good at that. But we need to move on to asking questions about what changed as a result of our extension work.

Last week at the Engagement Scholarship conference – Penn State Extension had a poster on the Dining with Diabetes program where they actually tested the A1C levels before and 3 months after the classes of almost 3000 class participants across the state. Those are the kind of results we need – it helps us see what does and does not work and helps us tell the story of the impact.

As an Extension professional, I am so pleased to have been a part of the North Central Family and Consumer Sciences Program leaders, who 18 months ago hired the Battelle Memorial Institute to do a report on the value of family and consumers sciences. After reviewing hundreds of data files that included past evaluation reports, impact statements and the literature related to family and consumer sciences, Battelle completed the report.

- It highlights the impact and value of the network of Extension FCS
- It showcased the economic impact of our programming
- And it highlighted challenges for us to get stronger in evaluating our work.

So, I challenge us to

- Start by basing our evaluation on the wicked problems. Asking ourselves how our portfolio of work is designed to impact the wicked problems?
- Create a standard and expectation for documenting the impact of extension work that gets to the SO WHAT question.
- Take the risk, and challenge ourselves to develop creative and valid ways to document the longer term impact of our programs on both the local, and the statewide basis.

If we are not asking the questions about our impact, and challenging ourselves to get better at finding those answers, how are we to know whether or not we are tackling the wicked problems, or that we are making a difference through our scholarship?

So, when I reflect on my career as an extension professional yes, we are the answer people. We have some of the answers for our community. But if we want to be the most valuable asset to our communities, we need to be the question people, and truly engage with our communities. We need to ask the questions that enable us to be true equal partners learning with our communities, together getting at the complexity of our community issues, asking questions through our research to apply and test new knowledge and taking on the challenge to answer the “SO WHAT” questions. We need to be the question people who work with our communities to find and share the answers.

Again, I want to thank you for this wonderful honor and thank ESP for creating venues where we can talk about the issues that are important to Extension across all of our program areas.

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