

Epsilon Sigma Phi Distinguished Service Ruby Lecture

***Legacy and Future: Disruptive Innovation Wins***

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As you can tell from the title of this presentation, I will look both forward and backward in the examination of forces affecting the Cooperative Extension System, its workers and its programs. My intent is to provoke your thinking while poking a few sacred cows along the way.

If you have heard or read other Ruby lectures, you know the formula. First, former recipients are acknowledged, followed by thanking one's colleagues. Then the lecturer describes their career path that led them to today. The body of the lecture refers to a current book while waxing about some combination of change, excellence, the future and leadership. While I might take a few diversions, my comments today will include these items.

Importantly, I want to recognize those Ruby honorees who came before me. As someone who has worked in the field since 1980, I know many of them personally, and glad for those whose fingerprints remain on my own career. I am especially pleased to be surrounded by twenty or so Oregon colleagues today who share this recognition of our mutual innovative work.

I think it meaningful that my career did not begin with an extension appointment, but in the private sector where I was responsible for a small research office for a forestland management company. In that capacity, I was a problem solver when things needed immediate attention-things like insect and disease outbreaks, reforestation failures and water quality. In my struggle to be responsive, I discovered my land-grant university extension service that provided intellectual depth, research design and other support like graduate students that I didn't have. I supplied practical and representative problems they needed to perform their mission and serve society. Through such shared work, I came to understand and value the role of partnerships in tackling meaningful problems that ultimately serve all people.

Today, I will begin by observing some mega forces going on around us, then interpret them in an extension context and prescribe actions for us to consider, including consequences of inaction. And finally, bringing it home to inspire each of us to think and behave differently.

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## Mega Forces

Mega Forces as described by noted futurist Ross Dawson are many<sup>i</sup>. While they don't necessarily predict the future, they show emergent pathways that can help us anticipate and prepare for the future.

One obvious mega force is *technology*. Dawson points out quite simply that everything is connected. The convergence of wireless technology with what is regarded as the "internet of things" makes the flow of electrons (and information) ubiquitous. Driverless cars are becoming a reality that will likely lead to safer roads. In fact, Dawson predicts that human drivers may be outlawed in the future as too dangerous. A recent Chronicle of Higher Education article<sup>ii</sup> observed the unfolding personality of Generation Z—those born after 1995 who are now university students and who are changing the way professors regard electronic devices in classrooms. While once banned, the article observes that the future will likely include a ban on device bans.

Another mega force acknowledges changing features of *society*. This is especially true as humans expect excellence in everything and while transparency and accountability are the norm. The Washington Post cited polling that shows Americans are losing faith in democracy—and in each other<sup>iii</sup>. Nearly 80 percent of 18-24 year olds say to be careful dealing with people compared to only half who are 65 years old and greater. Is this a role for Extension? What about increasingly diverse and sometimes marginalized populations without uniform access to policy making? At a retreat of the Western Extension Directors Association, the answer was a resounding "yes". As part of the resulting "Timberline Manifesto", the group identified extension and engagement as platforms for democracy—including capacity for informed thought, social and economic change<sup>iv</sup>. I concur with the observation that the real purpose of education is to make your mind a pleasant place to spend your spare time.

*Cities* are a mega force where population densities exceed 2,500 per square mile, compared to the United States average of 87, and in my home state Oregon of 40. Today, 82 percent of Americans live in cities of 50,000 or more population. In the last 4 years, two-thirds of rural counties actually lost population. So what are the implications of this shift that is driving things like transportation efficiency, restructuring of work, and the desire for immediacy—like Amazon deliveries to your doorstep in one hour? I am reminded of the famous bank robber Willie Sutton who replied when asked why he robbed banks, observed, "that's where the money is". Thus if extension intends to focus on people, their problems, issues and opportunities, we will shift resources to urban areas and find ways to increase efficiencies elsewhere.

We live with what verges on infinite news that takes advantage of *media* as a mega force. People want, and can get, everything, everywhere, all the time. And media production isn't what it used to be. Algorithmic journalism utilizes computer formulas to create cogent stories and reports from data. Now this doesn't necessarily eliminate writers from our ranks, but casts them in more curation roles where news and communication is a combination of professionals, crowds and algorithms.

A final (but not exhaustive) mega force acknowledges that roles of *leadership* are changing- advancing beyond individuals to organizations and systems. In his 2014 book, *Originals: How Nonconformists Move the World*, Adam Grant describes progressive organizational behavior as an adaptive culture that welcomes dissent and inspires divergent thinking and critical upward feedback<sup>v</sup>. While a departure from the common "command" environment, this is not new. Coined in 1948 as part of cybernetics, the *Law of Requisite Variety* says that to deal with diverse problems, we need to have a repertoire of responses at least as nuanced as the problems we face.

#### So what are the implications for Extension?

*Our audiences are outsmarting us.* This is especially true for sophisticated information seekers in a world of big data. One of our best Extension educators observed that Google has the potential to displace her entirely. So what distinguishes Extension in the information ecosystem? It is our ability to synthesize and integrate science-based knowledge beyond simple information. And we should never trade away our credibility and trust that accompanies it. Some have signaled an alarm that, left alone, the deligitimization of science allows people to draw and act upon unfounded conclusions. We see this tendency in conversations about climate change and genetically modified organisms, among others.

*Workshops, the tried and true Extension method, are not good enough to meet individuals' needs.* Learners are different from one another and increasingly diverse, requiring expanded tools to meet needs. Nowhere is this more true than being driven through a social justice lens, insuring that our relationship to society is equitable and inclusive. Each person is in a unique place and can be targeted with precisely the needed information by utilizing a customer relationship management (CRM) design to match learners with knowledge. Extension needs to learn from the private sector that has long monitored our buying habits in order to match marketing to individuals' needs.

*Systematic needs assessments, the hallmark of extension program planning, may be on their way out as episodic data collection, instead giving way to real-time, constant conversations with society.* A growing literature describes strategic planning as dead<sup>vi</sup>! Instead, leading companies focus on nimble and flexible execution of programs. The simple recognition is that the future doesn't cooperate with plans. Thus, a great organization should assess alternative future scenarios and

plan contingencies. A recent Forbes magazine article prescribes development of effective teams within a nimble organizational culture and looking three months out to maintain agility and an ability to adjust on the fly<sup>vii</sup>.

*The university as expert model is passing away.* What is known as the “social economy”, consisting of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and foundations, is working on issues and audiences once the exclusive domain of Extension. In Oregon alone, there are more than 150 non-profit foundations and at least 70 youth-serving organizations. So what distinguishes us? Let’s consider adding value by increasing the capacity of others to address issues of common importance, thus “wholesaling” knowledge in addition to our historic “retailing” directly to clients.

*In addition to a core workforce, extension educators will be short term with specialty skills.* This approach fits with the culture of millennial and generation Z populations and helps drive responsiveness and adaptability. I can easily see movement among our universities towards strategically shared hires within and region and use of visiting sabbatical faculty to fit niche market skills for short periods.

*Public appropriations tend towards flat, and no growth in extension is not an option.* Growth in our abilities can be fueled not only with partnerships but with private resource mobilization through philanthropy, crowd funding and selective fees. In 2015, US universities raised 40.3 billion dollars (an 8 percent increase). There is an observable trend away from priority for infrastructure, athletics and scholarships towards tangible community outcomes of the type addressed by Extension<sup>viii</sup>. If only 1 percent of this total could be capture by Extension, the value would exceed national Smith-Lever capacity funds by 100 million dollars.

*Scholarship redefined by Extension’s engagement with community partners is respected in our university community.* The evidence for this is seen in new journals devoted to community-engaged scholarship, the Engaged Scholarship Consortium of universities and new Academy of Engagement Scholarship. In addition, a growing number of universities are recognized by the elective community engagement credential granted by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

*Extension offices are more virtual and less like the traditional co-located spaces.* Extension educators locate themselves for maximum exposure to learners and partners. Increasingly, Extension faculty are located at community colleges and other partner locations.

*Human-machine boundaries increasingly dissolve.* Synthetic intelligence is expressed all around us, and Extension will learn to utilize algorithmic journalism and machine-assisted production of publications, news stories and associated learning objects.

Actions for the new reality.

*Hire from the outside.* By requiring Extension experience when hiring, incoming staff replicate our existing culture and limits the value of difference in inspiring creativity and innovation. The most recent and innovative hires in my organization came from the Peace Corps, military and nongovernmental organizations.

*Stimulate, share and reward innovation.* I remember a trip to a successful Japanese company whose CEO had a simple motto, “Do something, try anything”. Innovation in our work is not about “things”, but a way of thinking. We must move from a culture of efficiency and execution to one of innovation. Efficiency can breed complacency and more status quo which risks being disrupted by others. In his book, *Originals...*, Adam Grant describes what he terms “middle class conformity”, a culture that reinforces itself.

Disruptive innovation is a concept first described by Harvard Professor Clayton Christensen when others enter a mature market and take customers away<sup>ix</sup>. Examples include Uber’s disruption of transportation, Apple’s penetration into the music industry, and Airbnb’s stealing hotel trade. A relevant question is, “can Extension disrupt from within”? I am thinking yes-or at least maybe. We see some evidence of disruptive innovation as part of eXtension’s Ask an Expert widget. Other disruptions are Oregon State’s *Open Campus*<sup>x</sup> approach to community education and a dramatic expansion of youth education into week-long residential “Outdoor Schools”<sup>xi</sup>.

*Expect new programs.* The Timberline Manifesto called for more demand-driven programs rather than be driven by implementation of existing research. New programs require generation of new ideas, not all of which will be good. Thus, let’s learn to expect and recognize that many new things will fail, and we will learn along the way. How about development of a “fail fast” grant program to inspire testing new ideas? Today’s status quo program development model looks like: Idea-Funding-Implement-Evaluation-Failure (maybe). A experimental approach looks like: Many Ideas-Evaluate/Validate-Iterate (test)-Fund to Scale-Impact!

*Educators move more.* Generational changes in Extension’s workforce may do this naturally as newer hires join us for a limited period to work on a passionate issue then move on. Those who spend a career in one place doing one thing can stop seeing possibilities, and are at risk of “going native” at the expense of adaptation.

*Boundary spanning.* Boundaries restrict the power of collaboration and thus innovation and learning. More boundary spanning includes working across educational systems of K-12, community colleges and higher education. Similarly, university resources are levered and expanded by working across missions of education (learning), research (discovery), and outreach (engagement). Let’s bring more matriculated students into our statewide presence and form research and engagement teams to inspire broader impacts and enhance success at extramural funds and associated impacts.

*Embrace engagement.* Extension is largely missing from powerful and growing conversations that embrace engagement with communities served in reciprocal relationships that honor knowledge of all types to co-create solutions.

*Pay attention to our brand.* I don't mean marketing that provides an outward focus on promotion. Branding, in contrast, is an inward facing definition of why we exist. What are the big ideas that characterize our unique identity and personality? At Oregon State, we emphasize our personality traits as progressive, helpful, adventurous, collaborative, visionary and welcoming.

#### Consequences of inaction.

*Lost identity.* It would be all too easy to become invisible in this crowded space within the knowledge ecosystem.

*Captured by single interests.* I have had Extension accused as a service to help farmers make profits. While solvency is a requisite of business in a free enterprise economy, what is the associated public value? Safe and affordable food! Due in part to Extension, America enjoys the world's smallest fraction of disposable income needed for food. In the West, we are developing public value statements for enhanced natural resources, sustainable water, reduced costs of health care, and community self-determination.

*Yielding of outreach and engagement leadership.* Extension exists in an increasingly large information market, and without acting boldly, is at risk of marginalization relative to others' strengths.

#### Bringing it all home.

*Develop rural/urban interdependence.* Extension is a historic rurally-focused institution with a growing footprint in urban areas. Let's foster connections, not divides by working on the items on which both populations depend—food systems, energy, transportation and recreation, among others.

*Modularize and hybridize.* Immediate and mobile content is king. Let's develop fragments of learning that can be mixed, matched and bundled into larger engagement that matches learner needs. One Oregon Extension educator is combining degree-seeking students with industry professionals learning exactly the same information. Students place their learning on a transcript and professionals put the knowledge to work the next day.

*Credential learners.* Help make our clients feel part of the institution by developing badges for successful completion. Increase Extension return customers as the academic equivalent of student retention.

*Work in partnership.* A partnership approach deserves consideration within and outside of Extension. Opportunities exist to serve as the outreach arm of other state

and federal agencies, and requires that we generate working relationships and the commensurate trust gained from positive experiences.

*Convene disparate communities.* Universities are respected neutral parties and can serve as a “village green” around contentious issues not otherwise possible. In my time, I have played distinct roles on convening communities of interest around 1) anadromous fish and 2) the undocumented workforce, each bringing together public and private parties with huge differences to work on a common topic.

*Describe impacts and tell stories.* Develop a few simple measures of the return on investment in Extension work. Because of the diversity of programs, we are challenged to aggregate our impacts over large geographies and human characteristics. How to compare the value of reducing teen pregnancy and reducing crop losses due to insects and disease? A recent national meeting of Extension Directors and Administrators rallied for a focus on public value, including human stories and utilization of infographics rather than text-heavy reports.

*Be politically strategic.* Extension should know and use relationships in smart ways, especially in recruiting those who can speak for our value. Grassroot masses and grassroots individuals play different and complimentary roles. Develop and use political champions for our work. Use issues to cultivate connections and involve policy makers in programs.

It is up to us—of all my (arguable) points laid out here, my purpose is to help us be thoughtful. One thing is probably true about where we’re heading, As Charles Handy said in his book, *The Age of Unreason*<sup>xii</sup>, “The future isn’t what it used to be”. So let’s get ready for it, and **welcome to the future!**

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<sup>i</sup> <https://rossdawson.com/>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.chronicle.com/article/Gen-Z-Changes-the-Debate-About/241163>

<sup>iii</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/americans-are-losing-faith-in-democracy--and-in-each-other/2016/10/14/b35234ea-90c6-11e6-9c52-0b10449e33c4\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.4d05633239b6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/americans-are-losing-faith-in-democracy--and-in-each-other/2016/10/14/b35234ea-90c6-11e6-9c52-0b10449e33c4_story.html?utm_term=.4d05633239b6)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.joe.org/joe/2015august/comm1.php>

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.adamgrant.net/originals>

<sup>vi</sup> [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the\\_strategic\\_plan\\_is\\_dead.\\_long\\_live\\_strategy](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_strategic_plan_is_dead._long_live_strategy)

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brentgleeson/2017/11/08/how-leaders-inspire-change-in-the-21st-century/#6960a2624bfd>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://thefullerfoundation.org/current-trends-in-higher-education-philanthropy/>

<sup>ix</sup> [https://www.christenseninstitute.org/disruptive-innovations/?gclid=EAlaIQobChMI89-59q-w1wIVzl9-Ch0GhQ9jEAAYASAAEgJ-aPD\\_BwE](https://www.christenseninstitute.org/disruptive-innovations/?gclid=EAlaIQobChMI89-59q-w1wIVzl9-Ch0GhQ9jEAAYASAAEgJ-aPD_BwE)

<sup>x</sup> <http://opencampus.oregonstate.edu/>

<sup>xi</sup> <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/news/release/2017/09/statewide-outdoor-school-program-and-running-new-osu-leader-and-funding-process>

<sup>xii</sup> [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/74628.The\\_Age\\_of\\_Unreason](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/74628.The_Age_of_Unreason)