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# **Extension, the Land-Grant Mission, and Civic Agriculture: Cultivating Change**

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**Abstract:** Criticisms claiming the land-grant system has failed its mission and recent restructuring in the food system have together challenged the role played by Extension. This article explores whether a framework of southeast Michigan's Food System Economic Partnership (FSEP) fosters civic participation in the agrifood re-localization movement. Employing a case study approach, we discuss this framework and provide an overview of Extension educator involvement. Our case study indicates that the FSEP structure enables Extension professionals to expand their repertoire of community interaction models and engage citizens as agrifood citizens and leaders in order to move towards sustainable development.

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## **Introduction**

In recent decades, a chorus of concern has arisen over the ability of land-grant universities to fulfill their institutional mission. Critics claim that land-grant institutions have turned their back on solving the practical problems faced by the residents of their state and sacrificed cultivating citizenship to the task of training the future workforce. These accusations force Extension professionals to reconsider their roles within the context of the land-grant mission.

In the midst of this institutional challenge, changes taking place in the agrifood system are of concern for a growing population. Researchers are learning that changes in contemporary agriculture can often be attributed to forces beyond the farm, such as in the distribution, retail, and consumption sectors (Allen, 2004; Bonanno, Busch, Friedland, Gouveia, & Mingione, 1994; Wright, 2005). At the same time, food and agriculture issues are gaining the attention of non-traditional stakeholders such as city planners and food policy councils (Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999). In the midst of fears that Extension is losing its relevance (McDowell, 2001; Schuh, 1993), catalyzing civic engagement in the agrifood system provides Extension educators with an opportunity to be at the forefront of re-invigorating the land-grant mission while simultaneously introducing agrifood issues to new populations. In this way, Extension educators are in a position to advance agrifood sustainability like few others.

This article draws on a case study of the Food System Economic Partnership (FSEP), an economic development partnership in southeast Michigan, and explores the role of Extension educators in fulfilling land-grant university mandates in the context of agrifood restructuring. After presenting a brief background on the changes happening in land-grant institutions and the restructuring taking place within the food system, we outline the organizational framework of FSEP. We then highlight the ways in which Extension educators engage in catalytic, or "leaderful," work for food system revitalization. We show that partnerships such as the collaboration between Extension and FSEP provide a model by which Extension educators can fulfill their institutional mandate and individuals can practice food citizenship.

## The Land-Grant Idea

The characteristic mission of land-grant universities stems from two components. Land-grant personnel are charged with providing research and education in an effort to solve everyday problems. At the same time, they are responsible for preparing students for democratic citizenship (McDowell, 2001). For agriculture, this mission entails a commitment to advance equitable agrifood development by facilitating public education and engagement around agricultural research (Middendorf & Busch, 1997). In the past, however, land-grant universities, including the Extension component, have facilitated a structure of agriculture that has produced differential benefits and helped to stratify rural populations (Berry, 1977; Buttel & Busch, 1988; Hightower, 1973; McDowell, 2001; Middendorf & Busch, 1997; Ostrom & Jackson-Smith, 2005).

Years ago the call was sounded for land-grant universities to move beyond a one-way transfer of information and technology, and to be "sympathetically and productively involved with their communities" (Kellogg Commission, 1999, p. 9). Nowhere is this challenge more fully felt than in the case of Extension, which is being called upon to transform the traditional expert-model of education delivery (Boyer, 1990). This model clearly has benefits, but at the same time, it has created power imbalances between knowledge holders defined as "experts" and citizens who function as passive consumers of information (Fear, Rosaen, Bawden, & Foster-Fishman, 2006). This state reproduces a "deficiency view" of people who need a "hero" to save them (Senge, 1990). The result has been further stratification of rural society and individual alienation from institutions designed to serve the public good.

Recent scholarship overwhelmingly suggests that organizations embracing an integrated and catalytic role are more likely to crack the code to lingering problems and move towards sustainable development (Fear et al., 2006; Peters, 2002; Schuh, 1993). To this end, a conversation is burgeoning regarding how land-grant universities can be more faithful to their historical commitment by reconsidering the model of education and leadership.

Pigg and Bradshaw (2003) distinguish the "locality-center development" from the newer "catalytic development" model. The former has traditionally rallied resources to address community problems. In contrast, the catalytic development model leverages "local resources and networks to find local solutions in

regional and global exchanges that expand capacity and investments" (Pigg & Bradshaw, 2003, p. 386). Likewise, Sandmann and Vandenberg (1995) advocate moving beyond the prescribed boundaries of the "expert-model" and call for "leaderful" organizations that place the focus on the group rather than individual skill development. This approach catalyzes change through cooperation with citizens to develop the capacity to solve socially shared problems rather than developing dependency upon public institutions.

What do leaderful Extension educators do? Sandmann and Vandenberg (1995) conceptualize a 21st century model of "community action leadership development (CALD)." This model represents "the development of energized communities of co-leaders and co-learners committed to concerted action toward a collective vision" (Sandmann & Vandenberg, 1995, p.4) and is catalyzed by community, vision, learning, and action. Sandmann and Vandenberg lay out six traits that define leaderful roles and apply to the work of Extension educators:

- Facilitation
  
- Learner focus
  
- Leadership focus
  
- Issue/action focus
  
- Non-prescriptive
  
- Process as content

It is important to note that while some of the concepts used to describe these newer approaches to leadership might be defined as buzzwords, new concepts are essential in not only denoting but also producing a fundamentally different way for Extension educators to undertake their work. This is discussed more fully when we provide tangible examples of how Extension educators manifest these traits in their work with FSEP. First, however, we turn to a brief discussion of the restructuring taking place in the agrifood system to set the context for this important work.

## **Food System Restructuring**

The number of U.S. farms has continuously declined over the past century even while agricultural productivity has climbed. Moreover, competing values around land use and food have created political hotbeds in rural communities. Despite this instability, there is a bright spot in the transformative impulse within the U.S. agrifood system (Wright & Middendorf, 2007). Conventional agrifood systems typified by commodification, intensification, and industrialization have proven incapable of meeting the multiplicity of human needs embodied in health, environment, and distributive justice issues (Friedmann, 2004; Goodman & Watts, 1997). As a result, academics, practitioners, and movement activists have advocated for a turn to food system re-localization.

Agri-food system re-localization includes an umbrella of initiatives such as farmers markets, community supported agriculture, retail cooperatives, and you-pick stands that shorten the spatial and temporal distance

between producers and consumers. Lyson (2004) describes such initiatives as "civic agriculture," which can provide new market opportunities for producers as well as enhance the social and human capital of the community in which it is embedded. When value chains are shortened to bring producers and consumers closer together, social and environmental values can be more fully articulated and monitored (Lyson, 2004). While other efforts to broker closer ties between producers and consumers, such as food product labels, have failed to foster public discourse on food system values (DeLind, 2000), civic agriculture and face-to-face interaction bear the potential to increase communication between and understanding amongst producers and consumers (Winter, 2003).

Still, in order to mitigate the potential of reproducing hegemonic practices of environmental degradation or social injustice within a localized exchange of food (Bellows & Hamm, 2001; DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; Hinrichs, 2002), producers and consumers must not only participate in face-to-face market exchanges, they must also engage in dialogue around the values by which a localized food system is prized. In order for this to take place, an individual's role in a true civic agriculture must extend beyond merely that of a local consumer or producer (DeLind, 2002). Meaningful change in the agrifood system is dependent on a re-integration of both economic and non-economic roles (Wright & Middendorf, 2007).

For example, integration can begin by blending consumption needs with non-consumption values, such as care for the environment, community well-being, landscape amenities and aesthetics, animal welfare, and others. Purchasing food that honors these non-productionist values can lead to agrifood citizenship (Hassanein, 2003). In short, those engaged in food system restructuring efforts must be willing to elicit the values of community members around food systems in order to create the foundation for a civically based agriculture.

## **FSEP Framework**

The Food System Economic Partnership (FSEP) is an economic development collaborative of five counties in southeast Michigan: Jackson, Lenawee, Monroe, Washtenaw, and Wayne. FSEP promotes itself as a "catalyst for change in the food system." County Extension directors and Extension educators in the region were hearing the same lament from agrifood interests about the need for change in the food system. The educators recognized, however, that any effort to transform the food system would require an integrated approach with producers, processors, distributors, retailers, restaurateurs, health professionals, and others with interest in food system viability.

Beginning in 2004, a diverse group of stakeholders were invited to meetings to discuss agrifood system issues in the five-county region. These early meetings led to the formation of a group with common interest in using agriculture and food to fuel economic opportunity. A graduate student intern was hired to provide organizational support for the group.

The group recognized that if a coalition representing a variety of sectors in the agrifood system was going to work together effectively, they would need considerable organizational development. Under the guidance of professional facilitators, they began to develop a vision, mission, guiding principles, and strategic plans, in the end adopting four overarching goals:

- Improve the viability of the agricultural sector in the region
- Provide economic revitalization opportunities for urban areas

- Improve consumer understanding of what is produced, processed and marketed in the region
- Improve producer understanding of consumer needs

The group now functions with a 30-member leadership team and a seven member Board of Directors, comprised of one representative from each of the five counties and two members at-large. All leadership team members serve on one or more of four work teams. The work teams include the following committees:

- Research & Development—conducts research on the regional food system and defines key sub-sectors with high growth potential and/or impediments to growth
- Business Innovation & Networking—works with entrepreneurs and community groups to facilitate business development by attracting public and private sector investment and by creating networking opportunities for food system businesses
- Farm to School—works to increase the amount of local foods in schools through a collaborative approach
- Education and Outreach—facilitates educational opportunities for stakeholders across the food system, primarily through an annual conference of 200+ participants

The leadership team meets monthly, rotating meeting locations across each of the five counties. The meetings include discussion and updates from each of the work teams and the Board of Directors. Often it includes a special presentation or field trip highlighting some component of the local food system in the host county. The majority of the work within the organization is achieved within the work teams. Work teams meet throughout the month, with team members integrating the work of FSEP into their daily lives.

FSEP contracts with an individual who serves as a project manager and coordinates projects among the leadership team and work teams. The project manager is also responsible for the financial reporting and works with the Board of Directors in fund development. Other contractors are also hired to complete specific projects.

Financial support for FSEP initiatives comes from a variety of funding sources, including county government, foundations, state government, agricultural organizations, and Michigan State University. In-kind contributions from regional businesses and organizations have been critical in supporting the work of FSEP. Not only do the contributions provide necessary resources, but also they spread the word about the work of FSEP and foster much needed public acceptance.

Since its inception, FSEP has successfully facilitated improvements in the regional food system. For example, FSEP initiated a policy change within a major food service provider to allow local food purchases from outside their traditionally approved sources. As a result of such accomplishments, FSEP is viewed as a valuable asset by local stakeholders and serves as a model for replication in other regions of Michigan.

## Leaderful Catalysts for Change

In this section we provide detailed discussion of the roles through which Extension educators catalyze engagement in the food system through their work with FSEP. We focus on evidence of educators breaking the traditional mold of "one-way transfer of knowledge" and adopting a reciprocal leaderful approach.

### Facilitation

FSEP Extension educators engage in informal guidance rather than structured teaching. Facilitation does not imply neutrality; rather, as in teaching, facilitation can be biased and control outcomes. Good Extension educators are aware of this possibility and work to minimize undue influence.

In some meetings it would be difficult to identify the Extension educator if you were unaware of roles. They often sit quietly and allow others to assume leadership roles and contribute only when called upon. They are there to guide and support. They may not abandon all technical roles, but these are only used when invited. While they may serve as the chairperson of work committees, they also sit on other committees, allowing their community partners to take the lead. When more structured facilitation is called for, they show value for group diversity by ensuring all voices are integrated into the conversation. Extension educators work diligently to maintain a broad base of participant engagement to ensure that individuals representing every aspect of the food system are given a voice.

### Learner Focus

FSEP members participate in research initiatives through the Research and Development Committee to inform much of the work in which they engage. For example, research has been conducted on grain production and marketing, food business mapping, restaurant marketing potential, and supermarket industry structure in the region. This research is embarked upon cooperatively or, in some cases, it is contracted. In this way, educators are eschewing an instructional approach in their engagement with the public. They are forging a new learning-centered dynamic that puts co-discovery at the center of the relationship between university and non-university personnel and ending the educators' exclusive claim to knowledge, whether real or perceived.

This transition to a co-learning partnership comes out of a growing public consensus that knowledge should not be the exclusive province of experts and inaccessible institutions, especially with respect to such intimate issues as what we eat. The adoption of a co-learning approach is more effective than an instructional model because it responds to changes taking place in the larger society, such as a desire for participatory governance, transparency, and public work to invigorate our democracy.

### Leadership Focus

Extension professionals inspire their co-leaders/learners to look beyond "experts" and to value food chain actors as the primary agents charged with improving our food system. Power and decision making begins by referring to every member of FSEP as a member of the leadership team.

Some members volunteer to serve on the Board of Directors, which is charged with the logistical details of running a non-profit organization, but the decisions about the work in which FSEP will engage take place with the larger leadership team and in the work committees. The board is charged with control and management of business property, personnel, and operating funds and reports to the leadership team at each monthly meeting. The role of the leadership team is to create and implement a strategic action plan aligned

with the FSEP mission. The seven-member Board of Directors is comprised of one representative from each of the five counties and two at-large members.

## Issue/Action Focus

Long-term and sustainable change requires leading/learning centered approaches on issues of concern to people in their everyday lives. To this end, FSEP has undertaken research to learn as much as possible about the changes taking place in food and agriculture. Furthermore, FSEP adopts an issue or problem focus by engaging in research with stakeholders and citizens in the affected communities to gauge what "real" people think are the problems with their food system. They are not engaged in textbook interpretations of social problems, but real-world interpretations as defined by local residents.

The diverse membership of FSEP often elicits competing value systems around how to best design a viable food system for the region. For example, members' opinions on the value of organic and conventional agriculture have differed significantly. Despite this, team members have been able to maintain mutual respect for the differences, and some have even cited how their views on the issue have been tempered as a result of learning and interaction within the team (Wright, Score, & Connor, 2007). When conflict does arise, there is an attempt to manage it in a way that retains a diversity of opinions and ideas, which aid in the development of creative change, but not to the point of leading to communication breakdown.

## Non-Prescriptive

Non-prescriptive action results from all participants taking ownership of the collaborative work by articulating their own values and vision for the work at hand. At the time of their formation, FSEP invested in organizational capacity building. They crafted a shared vision, articulated organizational goals, and adopted guiding principles. The guiding principles are:

- Integrity,
  
- Community/common good,
  
- Insights/knowledge/education,
  
- Teamwork/collaboration/empowering people,
  
- Success/achievement outcomes,
  
- Entrepreneurship/innovation, and
  
- Stability/sustainability.

Whether the principles are aligned with leading theories of organizational development or social change is not necessarily of concern. It is the non-prescriptive process that distinguishes this work. This process built capacity within the organization so that local resources could be accessed to catalyze regional development.

Pigg and Bradshaw's (2003) theory of catalytic community development suggests that capacity building such as this is essential to sustainable community development.

## Process as Content

Sandmann and Vandenberg (1995) claim that the *process* is the content in leaderful arrangements. In the process of working toward the stated goals of catalyzing change in the food system, participants are also learning facilitation skills, community building, decision making, teamwork, conflict management, group visioning and strategizing, etc. Bradshaw and Pigg (2003, p.386) argue that "resource coordinator and network facilitator" is emblematic of a third stage in community development whereby technicians and specialists are yesterday's answer to social problems and "regionally based collaborative approaches to problem-solving" are more appropriate. In this way, the shared interest related to the problems facing agriculture is addressed and, in the process of collaborating for agrifood renewal, community is being developed.

## Conclusion

Will land-grant universities achieve their mission? What role will Extension play in democratizing knowledge? Some might argue that the great land-grant university experiment failed and that it is time to hammer the last nails in the coffin. Yet within the increasingly contested agrifood system there is a pressing need for public institutions to rise above interest group politics and bring together stakeholders in order to respond to and propel changes for the betterment of society. This article has demonstrated how Extension educators are reinvigorating their public mission by modeling leaderful traits and contributing to a food system that is more participatory, equitable, and democratic.

A sustainable agrifood system will require leadership for the common good that engages in cooperative visioning, leading, and learning. Those engaged in food system restructuring efforts must be willing to harness synergy, communicate values openly, and act together in order to create the foundation for a civically based agriculture. Simply relying on shortened supply chains that bring people face-to-face spatially is insufficient. Citizens must have a context within which they can dialogue about their values and visions for a sustainable agriculture. Community-Extension partnerships such as FSEP that take a leaderful approach move us closer in this direction and invigorate the land-grant mission at the same time.

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Agricultural extension is the application of scientific research and new knowledge to agricultural practices through farmer education. The field of 'extension' now encompasses a wider range of communication and learning activities organized for rural people by educators from different disciplines, including agriculture, agricultural marketing, health, and business studies.