

## Extension Communications—Up, Down, or Nowhere?

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## Extension Communications—Up, Down, or Nowhere?

### Abstract

The Nixon administration's proposal for rural development revenue sharing has stirred up a lot of anxiety in extension circles.

# *Extension Communications--Up, Down, or Nowhere?*

JACK BELCK

THE NIXON ADMINISTRATION'S proposal for rural development revenue sharing has stirred up a lot of anxiety in extension circles. The worries created by the proposal that would put extension's survival in the hands of state governments are by no means irrational, though watching administrators scurry about in panic leads one to realize that the security extension once had is pretty much gone forever.

But revenue-sharing isn't the only force at work to weaken, wipe out, or seriously remold extension, and those of us dedicated to educational communications can do no better than to reflect on the many pressures being applied to us from all sides, pressures that many of us feel in one way or another.

## *Pressure 1*

The land grant school hosting extension efforts has been bitten by the status bug since the time the state agricultural college was renamed the state college, and then the state university. "Old Aggie," proudly rising among its high-rise concrete bunkers as a "real university" is directed these days by men who strive mightily for glamor and prestige.

Creative arts centers, nuclear reactors, exotic research grants, growing numbers of PhD's on the often non-teaching faculty, symphony orchestras, and artists-writers-musicians-in-residence are among the prime status builders designed to lend a glossy, swinging image to what used to be "cowcolleges."

Unfortunately, other campus artifacts and institutions tend to be elbowed aside or buried altogether as administrators build their new universities. The single most objectionable campus fungus that catches their eye, of course, is the unit that was

the fundamental basis of "Old Aggie," the agricultural college. In state after state one sees land grant school presidents writhing with discomfort at the thought that close by their brand-new and elegant computer operations are buildings full of wood-choppers, farmers, and old-style PhD's who slog around barnyards and fields instead of staying indoors and writing for the scholarly journals.

The embarrassment is hard to erase, of course, because agriculture has built up a strong power base and is more or less loved by many older alumni, 4-H all stars, and the like, not to mention the muscle of the Farm Bureau, and the clout of Smith-Lever and Hatch funds pouring in annually.

But there is one way to cover the mess, if not obliterate it: change its name. At one land grant school desperately working to become a mini-Harvard, some anonymous word merchant brought forth the brilliant suggestion that the College of Agriculture be renamed the John F. Kennedy School for Environmental Sciences. A faculty meeting hooted this down, and when one wit asked what a "non-environmental science" was, the suggestion was laughed into oblivion. But other schools in other places, already softened up by the "agribusiness" title, succumbed and got lovely non-ag names.

While the status push is almost invisible to the outsider in those states with only one state university, it stands out sharply in others, where one tax-supported unit—the one with the land grant commitment—fights to gain the assumed prestige of the newer one that doesn't have to suffer the agriculture stigma. Perhaps that telltale word "state" between the state's name and the word university will have to stick, but rest assured a lot else is destined to go by the boards.

## *Pressure 2*

The computer isn't the only machine system to enchant land grant bureaucrats. More and more, we are getting into central printing services as the quaint extension duplicating services disappear. Though done in the name of efficiency and cost-cutting, this all-campus system tends to raise hob, increasing costs and leading to severe delays. The mimeo machine, which turned out the cheapest copy, since run by office help who didn't get paid for this chore, gave way to the multilith, just as carbon

paper copies at a penny a sheet or less disappeared as the Xerox machine offered them for five times as much.

Worse yet, when all printing is done in one shop, tacit priorities, though denied in public, are established, and if the president's office, the athletic publicity bunch, or the alumni office wants something, rest assured any extension publication ahead of it will be bumped.

Adding to this, the image-building of the university as a whole causes management to cast a jaundiced eye on "ugly, plain," extension publications. After all, the puff pieces so glowingly reporting university doings are in four colors, with slick artwork and many halftones, so why should 4-H be allowed to sully the scene with crude, photo-direct, side stapled things, even if they do the job with the kids?

### *Pressure 3*

Extension in many places is taking on a growing collection of social science PhD's who, unlike the old style agricultural specialists, are less interested and able to talk to the public and mainly concerned with chatting among their equals. The grassroots extension concept escapes them, and what extension publications editor hasn't been faced with what amounts to a 100 per cent rewrite because the social science author couldn't express one **practical, applicable idea**? The stick figure cover drawing disappears, to be replaced by footnotes—a sure way to turn off the readers extension wants to reach.

### *Pressure 4*

Inside the state extension service itself, other elements simmer, stew, and boil over from time to time. In state after state we see the wisp of smoke rising from the perennial conflict between extension ag specialists who want to help all kinds of citizens interested in making at least some money from the soil and the agribusiness types who turn their backs on any enterprise that doesn't require at least a \$100,000 mortgage. Part-time, subsistence, general, low-income farming—all viable and highly applicable to significant numbers of people in many states—gets short shrift while the "glamor" areas are talked, researched, and modelled to the point of nausea.

Meanwhile, some state experiment stations, allegedly dedi-



cated to feeding extension with useful research applicable to the state scene, seem to go their own way, too often headed by a PhD in the mini-bug sciences who sees little value in anything else. Because they can write publications costs into their contracts with Washington, the stations generally turn out prettier and more expensive publications than their extension brothers—though they are read far less, and most often not at all except by a precious few other experts.

In states where agriculture is very important, research tends to go along with need. But elsewhere, experiment thinkers grimly tout big agribusiness where not even the small can survive without lots of serious rethinking and hard work—if it's even worth it.

### *Pressure 5*

Every land grant university has its publicity office—probably disguised as a university relations office or some such thing. It contains editors, writers, artists, photographers, among others. The extension side also has its communications unit, similarly stocked with editors, writers, artists, and photographers.

Now—if it makes sense to round up all printing services under one roof, doesn't it make as much sense to do the same with the editorial bunch?

"No!" cries the brave extension communications chief, pointing out in less plain words than these that the university's office specializes almost solely on puffery, flackery, and what the cynical call lies. But extension communications, he explains, is an educational operation, designed to help the state's people, not assuage suspicious legislators, loosen the purse strings of alumni, and convince the world at large that old Land Grant U has, in one short decade, arrived at the glorious pinnacle of superiority that it took Harvard 300 years to reach.

To see how this particular battle is going, check the annual listing of extension communication staffs among the states. One state has zero people, another two. It doesn't necessarily have much to do with how big agriculture is in a state, or how rural it is, or what the public can use.

### *Pressure 6*

Extension administrators, reacting to what social scientists tell them and feeling only too often the jostling from status-con-

scious university overlords, uneasily struggle with the concept of “change.” Brave speeches are bruited about, staff meetings abound as everyone is exhorted to work with the “disadvantaged,” cope with the problems of minorities, tackle the intricacies of urbanization, suburbanization, migration, pollution, dropouts, recreation, drug abuse, delinquency, crime—well, you name it, and someone says extension must dive in and “do good.”

Only few believe it's possible. Budgets are tight everywhere, dozens of other groups from OEO to SDS are charging the same barricades, and in their heart of hearts most extension people, from top to bottom, realize that there is enough to do just fulfilling the original charge given them a half century ago by Smith-Lever.

Adding to this turmoil, recruiting field staff becomes more and more difficult. Few these days will settle for a “dead end” county agent's job, especially if it's in a “backward” area, and the bright young girl who went into field work in the old days because it was that or teaching is more and more able to make as much money elsewhere, with fewer headaches.

4-H state staffs struggle with dwindling enrollments and an increasingly severe shortage of volunteer leaders. Home demonstration women split two ways. The old timers are abused for sticking with the “wrong” client groups. The young ones, eager to break new ground, find themselves cast adrift because the people at the top don't quite know where to go and how to program once they're there.

### *Pressures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 Added Together*

They all drop into the extension communications department lap. Competing commercial mass media kill interest in drab, uninformative, outdated publications and visual presentations—but there's less money to pit against the slick, artful full-color stuff of TV and magazines. The accusations from the radical left, the liberal press, prestigious social commentators are forceful, clear, and everywhere. But the social scientists on the state payroll remain dignified, calm, and forever addicted to their scholarly approach.

A candy or soft drink company spends \$3 million in one year alone on television ads to tell the public to consume their tooth-rotting, stomach-curdling glop. The extension TV unit bravely

## *The Counterpressure*

If there is one possible antidote for the apparent decline of extension it has to be the pressure being applied to universities to engage in the social action process.

The schools—quite rightly, I think—are resisting this, most insisting that the academic process can only suffer if scholarship and learning take a back seat to activism. But the call to action can easily enough be answered without jeopardizing academia if extension is given its due and allowed to carry the ball, though that will require university administrators to accept extension as something more than an unprestigious, old-fashioned un-thing. It will demand that extension be allowed to call itself extension, with no more of that asinine semantic horseplay that causes such euphemisms as “outreach” to be plastered over a perfectly respectable and honored word and activity.

The extension communicator knows all this because he has to live with it daily. He knows that he must—whenever he can get away with it—function in the area of programming, to help shove extension along when it falters, to feed his knowledge of people and their problems back into the specialists’ offices. In fact, he is extension’s greatest hope because rarely does any but the extension communicator have the clearcut, even glib and slick, aptitude for expressing clearly and cogently what many co-workers feel but are hard pressed to defend openly.

Just as democracy can survive only so long as its press is free, so can extension survive meaningfully only if its communicators communicate and help push back the too often unconsidered and irrational pressure on it.