

Trends Impacting the Future of Florida Extension

Olivia C. Caillouet, University of Florida
Amy Harder, University of Florida

305 Rolfs Hall P.O. Box 110540
Gainesville, FL 32611-0540

501-993-1060

Olivia.caillouet@ufl.edu
Amharder@ufl.edu

Trends Impacting the Future of Florida Extension

Introduction

Planning to address the needs of the future requires understanding today's trends (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). Along the same lines, Henning et al. (2014) described seven "grand societal challenges" ("Introduction," para. 1) that they anticipated would have an impact on the United States' (U.S.) future, such as food safety, mitigating a national health crisis, and improving the resiliency of the environment. Similarly, Fox et al. (2017) stated "Extension must become better equipped to efficiently and effectively address complex urban priorities" ("Introduction," para. 3). Despite known national trends, Extension remains an organization largely influenced by local contexts. We sought to assess the applicability of several national trends to our local context so our organization can more accurately plan to meet our state's future needs.

Theoretical Framework

Social constructivism was used to frame this research because relationships between Extension and the public are dynamic and ever changing. Additionally, we found during the data analysis that the emerging themes shared similarities with Burke and Litwin's (1992) causal model of organizational performance and change and so used it as a guide for discussing the findings. The Burke and Litwin change model emphasized a feedback loop that reflects numerous forces (external and internal) impacting organizations. The model was described using 12 key drivers for change which were divided into four main areas: (a) input (external environment), (b) throughput: transformational drivers (mission and strategy, leadership, and organizational culture), (c) throughput: transactional drivers (structure, systems, management practices, work climate, task requirements and individual skills, individual needs and values, and motivation), and (d) output (individual and organizational performance) (Robinson, 2019). Transformational drivers were defined as the primary catalyst for organizational change whereas transactional drivers were defined as short-term, mutually beneficial exchanges (Burke & Litwin, 1992). Together, transformational and transactional drivers contribute to a holistic understanding of organizational systems. Conceptualizing emerging themes within the Burke and Litwin change model can provide a theory-driven approach for addressing Extension's challenges in the future.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the future of the Florida Cooperative Extension Service (CES) and to identify the perceived impacts from numerous factors such as rapid population growth, natural disasters, and funding. A basic qualitative study was conducted to focus on how participants interpret their experiences, construct their worldview, and give meaning to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The target population was key individuals within the Florida CES who had sufficient institutional knowledge to be qualified to speculate about the future of Extension. A literature review that examined challenges and threats to Extension guided the development of the interview protocol which was approved as exempt by the University of Florida Institutional Review Board. A purposive sample targeted individuals representing a variety of roles in the organization. Participants were included from the 1862 and 1890 land-grant universities (LGUs) that partner to create Florida CES. Eight participants were

interviewed: two county agents, a state specialist, a state specialized agent, two regional specialized agents, and two state-level administrators. One-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted October-November 2019. The interviews were transcribed, double checked, and the constant comparative method was used with open coding to identify the initial codes (Saldaña, 2016). Thick descriptions, member checking, and an internal audit process were done to establish trustworthiness as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Results

Ultimately, five themes emerged from the interviews: (a) external environment, (b) mission and strategies, (c) structure, (d) systems, and (e) task requirements and individual skills. Participants agreed that the rising population in Florida has resulted in a loss of valuable agricultural land and the divide between urban and rural clientele has increased tension for Extension's attention. Extension remaining grounded in science-based information, and stakeholders trusting that the research is unbiased, were identified as important by several participants. However, maintaining stakeholder trust is challenging because of long-standing relationships between University of Florida Extension and industry groups. Additionally, participants explained how Extension is challenged to capture the attention of stakeholders who increasingly live in urban communities offering a plethora of services. Participants believed face-to-face interaction will continue to be important while simultaneously Extension will need to conduct education with online technology. The participants widely recognized clientele diversity in their state, considering the racial, ethnic, and socio-economic, and language characteristics. However, some participants expressed concern regarding Extension's ability to attract and serve diverse clientele demographics.

Conclusions

The research purpose was to identify challenging trends facing the future of Florida Extension. Similar factors that were found in this research, such as the need to address health, resource resiliency, and serving urban clientele were identified in the literature (e.g. Fox et al., 2017; Gregg & Irani, 2004; Scheer et al. 2011), suggesting Florida is not entirely unique in terms of impactful trends. However, Florida differed from national trends regarding the rapid increase in the state's racial and ethnic diversity (U.S. Census, 2015). The transformational factors challenging Extension were the external environment and mission and strategy. The challenging transactional factors were structure, systems, and task requirements and individual skills.

Implications and Recommendations

Transformational factors were identified as the primary catalyst for change (Burke & Litwin, 1992), so Extension could focus efforts towards those areas to overcome future challenges. Florida may also benefit from stronger collaborations with other Extension systems with similar growth patterns. Our findings indicated that Extension faculty had a limited understanding of several critical areas that are vital to addressing future challenges facing Florida Extension. Therefore, specialized training could be valuable. Lastly, Florida Extension could conduct research that prioritizes the future challenges identified in this research, which may be used to guide long-term organizational planning (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995).

References

- Burke, W. W., & Litwin, G. H. (1992). A causal model of organizational performance and change. *Journal of Management*, 18(3), 523–545.
- Fox, J. M., Ruemenapp, M. A., Proden, P., & Gaolach, B. (2017). A national framework for urban Extension. *Journal of Extension*, 55(5).
<https://www.joe.org/joe/2017october/a2.php>
- Gregg, J. A., & Irani, T. A. (2004). Use of information technology by county Extension agents of Florida Cooperative Extension Service. *Journal of Extension*, 42(3).
<https://www.joe.org/joe/2004june/rb2.php>
- Henning, J., Buchholz, D., Steele, D., & Ramaswamy, S. (2014). Milestones and the future for Cooperative Extension. *Journal of Extension*, 52(6).
<https://joe.org/joe/2014december/comm1.php>
- King, D. (2018). Hey Siri, what is the future of Extension? *Journal of Extension*, 56(5).
<https://www.joe.org/joe/2018september/comm1.php>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Robinson, J. (2019). *Burke-Litwin change model: Today's most influential model on organizational change*. <https://flevy.com/blog/the-burke-litwin-change-model-todays-most-influential-model-on-organizational-change/#:~:text=Readers%20are%20also%20interested%20in%20these%20resources%20,%20Change%20Enablement%20Workshop%20Presentation%20%20...%20>
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Scheer, S. D., Cochran, G. R., Harder, A., & Place, N. T. (2011). Competency modeling in extension education integrating an academic extension education model with an extension human resources management model. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 52(3), 64–74. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2011.03064>
- U.S. Census. (2015). *Detailed languages spoken at home and ability to speak English for the population 5 years and over: 2009-2013*.
<https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2013/demo/2009-2013-lang-tables.html>
- Witkin, B. R., & Altschuld, J. W. (1995). *Planning and conducting needs assessments: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.