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Vision 2010
University of Illinois Extension
A White Paper by
Extension Partners

Throughout its history University of Illinois Extension has adapted ... not only changing to meet the needs of an evolving society and clientele base but also shaping the future through research-based, educational programs.

The following white paper outlines a framework by which Extension could address current trends and statewide needs through 2010. The goal is to create a process by which Extension and its constituent base can develop major proposals designed to better position Extension to solve critical, statewide problems as well as to secure the necessary resources to conduct this programming.

Trends Shaping Illinois' Future

Dramatic and powerful changes are affecting individuals, the neighborhoods and communities they live in, and the institutions that support them. Illinois is characterized by:

Increasing Diversity

Illinois is becoming more multilingual and multicultural. At the same time, there are growing differences between the young and old, urban and rural, and rich and poor. Immigration brings new richness and dynamics to neighborhoods and communities. In urban areas, one of three people is from minority groups, and the most rapidly growing racial/ethnic group is Hispanic now at 12.3% of the population.

Global Economic and Political Pressures

Globalization of financial, service, manufacturing, and agricultural sectors is having a profound affect on all facets of life in Illinois. Time-honored rules of commerce have changed, affecting individuals, communities, and public institutions.

An Aging Population

The median age of the population continues to increase because of lower birth rates and longer life spans. Projecting U.S. Census figures, the proportion of the population older than 65 years will increase from 12.4% in 2000 to 19.6% in 2030. For the same period, the proportion of racial minority groups in the over 65 age group is expected to increase from 11.3% to 16.5% with Hispanics expected to increase from 5.6% to 10.9%. The growing number of older adults increases demands on the public health, medical, and social service institutions. Chronic diseases among older adults contribute to disability, diminished quality of life, and increased health and long-term care costs.

Rapidly Evolving Technological Change

Like the invention of the printing press in the 1400s, information technology has had a profound effect on the world. We have experienced rapid societal change made possible by the ability to instantly transmit large amounts of digital information. This has meant the delivery of informational and educational programs is also evolving at a rapid pace. Issues such as the "digital divide" need to be addressed and overcome so that information can be available to all.

Dramatic Urbanization

The realities of a long-term trend toward urbanization in Illinois have produced staggering statistics. Eighty-five percent of all citizens live in metropolitan areas. With rapid urbanization also comes increased diversity--racial, cultural, and economic. Another trend associated with urbanization relates to age. Eighty-six percent of the population growth in the Chicago metropolitan area is in the 18 and under range, and all counties with declining populations had double digit losses in the 25 to 34 age group.

Extension Programming for the Future

These dramatic trends cut across virtually every programmatic area of U of I Extension and impact them in a major way. They also affect the overall infrastructure of the Extension system in Illinois.

The question before Extension is how to respond? How can Extension strategically position itself for the future, staying at the forefront of the needs of Illinois as well as producing research-based, educational programs that help Illinois in positive and measurable ways? The approach is to create dynamic, new proposals for educational programming in several key areas that take into account the important trends shaping Illinois' future:

Economic and Community Development

Few Illinois communities or industries can remain vibrant without addressing issues of economic and community development. There is a growing need for research and training in the areas of attracting businesses, financing development, understanding the global economy, conducting international trade, gathering and analyzing data, developing marketing skills, and planning strategic initiatives. Internal growth as well as growth through entrepreneurship and leadership development will also be critical to future successes. Overarching all this is the continued importance of emphasizing economic development in environmentally friendly ways.

Agricultural Economic Development

Illinois farmers are among the most productive in the world. Yet, profitability has been hard to achieve. One of the best ways Extension can help farmers is to find ways for them to become more profitable. Today, more than ever, farmers need to find ways to manage their resources more effectively and efficiently, and find new businesses that take advantage of their skills and generate more profit. New uses of traditional crops, development of niche markets and alternative crops, environmental stewardship, agri-tourism, and expanded livestock operations represent potential opportunities for economic development.

Workforce Preparedness

An educated workforce is critical to the economic well-being of Illinois. Availability of people who are "workforce ready" is declining, while business and industry needs are becoming more demanding. Given the nature of workforce preparedness and the wide variety of jobs, a coordinated effort is needed to avoid duplication of effort. Technical and trade skills are in high demand and in short supply. Also, social and "teaming" skills are lacking in many candidates. The unique capabilities of the U of I College of Agriculture, Consumer and Environmental Sciences can provide strength in the food, green industry, and turf industry sectors.

Food Security

Except for air and water, nothing is more central to life than food. One of our nation's basic obligations is to ensure a healthy, adequate, and affordable supply. The American public has generally taken food safety and abundant supplies for granted, but new dangers face us today including exotic plant and animal diseases, toxins, or pests that threaten production and terrorists who threaten our food and water systems. Educational programming is essential to protect our food production capacity as well as educate people about the best nutritional habits.

Family Resiliency

The stresses on American families are well known, but just to mention a few: forty to fifty percent of all first marriages end in divorce; the number of children growing up in poverty is more than sixteen percent; the number of adults raising children while also caring for an aging parent has grown; an increase of single-parent families mostly headed by women; and rates of children diagnosed with learning and behavioral problems have soared. Timely educational programs have been proven to increase resiliency and would be especially helpful to families of all sorts. This is especially true in light of the growing problem with obesity in the United States.

Aging

As "Baby Boomers" reach their golden years, many experts predict that this unprecedented spike will have a dramatic affect on the social institutions of this country. Also, Americans are living longer. Together, these trends suggest a dramatic need for educational programming to help them lead more productive lives including nutrition education to reduce cardiovascular disease and diabetes, exercise programming to improve overall health and memory function, financial management lessons aimed at improving the financial well-being of this generation, and more.

Youth

The most pressing problems of children ages 10 to 17 include drug and alcohol abuse, sexual responsibility, delinquency, youth violence, and gangs. Research shows that dollars invested in educational programs for high-risk youth are well spent. The programs have been proven to keep youth in school and give them skills necessary to become productive citizens. The estimated return is five-to-one. In other words, five dollars are saved in terms of the cost of crime and incarceration for every dollar spent on educational programming.

While the number of youth educators in Illinois has increased substantially over the past few years, the goal of placing a youth educator in every Extension unit has not been reached.

The Process

Today, as never before, U of I Extension plays an important role in offering educational programming to people in Illinois. Extension is a valuable resource that should be funded at a level that allows it to remain customer-oriented and capable of delivering cutting-edge information on demand to a wide variety of Illinois citizens using the most effective educational media for specific audiences.

In a changing world, Extension must continue to change to meet emerging needs. This requires an administrative system that nurtures flexibility and encourages new ways of meeting audience needs. It also requires maintenance of the statewide Extension infrastructure and new resources, targeted to state priorities and focused on local needs.

Key to the statewide Extension infrastructure, which makes possible the local delivery of research-based, educational programming, is:

- The funding of the local county board match at a dollar-per-dollar level
- The funding of a youth educator in every Extension unit

In terms of new programmatic initiatives, it is recommended that U of I Extension and its constituent base develop bold new proposals that address the above mentioned program priorities and statewide trends. The proposals should include:

- A clear and concise problem statement with creative and effective educational solutions
- Specific plans to build staff capacity to successfully conduct the program for priority audiences and issues
- A list of outcomes and a practical method for measuring them
- A developed set of partners that strengthens the proposal and grounds it in the political realities of the state.

Extension's Historical Strengths

U of I Extension has always provided effective research-based, educational programs that help people put knowledge to work. There have been several guiding principles and inherent strengths of the system that have made Extension a successful educational institution providing ways for people to make their lives better.

- *Accessibility.* Through its network of community-based offices, Extension has been able to connect local people with educational programming utilizing the knowledge and expertise of the land-grant university to produce positive results.
- *Responsiveness.* The grassroots nature of Extension program development ensures that programming meets local needs. This also helps provide feedback to university researchers about emerging issues and problems.
- *Partnerships.* Extension has demonstrated its capacity to work with volunteers as well as other organizations and institutions so that the whole equals more than the sum of all the parts.
- *Neutrality.* All Extension programming is based on unbiased, university research. This objective foundation allows Extension educators to be as impartial as possible, delivering information that empowers people make their own decisions.
- *Integration.* The breadth of the Extension programmatic initiatives helps provide clientele with an in-depth educational approach to important issues.
- *Leadership.* Extension has a long track record of leadership in the area of educational program development. This manifests itself in many ways, including organizing the large number of volunteers associated with Extension, engaging in partnerships to generate new initiatives, and coordinating a myriad of programs and activities.

Conclusion

Extension Partners is a grassroots organization focused specifically on the advancement and enhancement of educational programs provided to citizens of Illinois through University of Illinois Extension. This vision statement outlines a practical strategy. It provides a framework for articulating the need for increased funding for U of I Extension so that it can more effectively meet the needs created by emerging, statewide issues. At this point, Extension Partners is seeking input, at many levels, regarding the themes and goals implicit in this statement and how we should proceed.