



CAREER PROGRESSION FOR URBAN EXTENSION PROFESSIONALS

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About WCMER

The Western Center for Metropolitan Extension and Research (WCMER) is a multi-university collaboration established by the Western Extension Directors Association to increase the internal capacity of Extension programs to address metropolitan issues, and to elevate the stature and value of Cooperative Extension to external metropolitan audiences. Since its founding in 2014 we have focused our efforts on applied research on best Extension practices and issues facing metropolitan areas, and professional development for Extension professionals, with a goal of better aligning programs and program delivery with the needs, issues and interest of their metropolitan constituency.

The WCMER believes that the land-grant university system, applied through Extension and in partnership with communities, governments, organizations, and corporations can help metropolitan regions improve the health and wellbeing of all residents, achieve equitable economic growth, and steward their natural environments. As an organization, we foster new partnerships and approaches to addressing novel situations.

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Career Progression for Urban Extension Professionals

Introduction

The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 which created land grant institutions, and the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 which established Extension, were both instituted when most of the U.S. population lived in rural areas. The traditional Extension model was designed to meet the needs of rural America during this era. However, according to the United State Census Bureau [1], 4 in 5 Americans now live in urban areas. This demographic shift has challenged Extension to adopt approaches that recognize the diversity and complexity of urban communities in order to effectively serve them. Our study examines urban Extension faculty roles with a lens on imposed academic requirements versus real urban community needs, and the challenges that urban Extension faculty encounter as they try to manage traditional academic expectations and structure to achieve the mission of the land grant university (LGU).

Many Extension scholars have expressed skepticism about using the traditional Extension model to meet the needs of urban communities [2]. The inadequacy of the traditional Extension model in serving urban communities has been well documented in the literature [3, 4]. As early as 1954, The Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities¹ reported that Extension had many difficulties delivering quality programs to urban audiences. In 1973, Paulson [5] identified some of the barriers that limited Extension's ability to meet the needs of the urban population. Although Extension has been adapting to serve the urban communities, it is still experiencing low visibility [4, 2]. In recent years, scholars have developed frameworks addressing the role of Extension in meeting the growing and changing needs of the urban population [6]. Some LGU's have already departed from the traditional Extension model using innovative strategies to meet the unique needs of the urban population [6].

The traditional academic model lacks flexibility, thereby creating career path challenges for urban Extension faculty. Extension leaders and scholars are looking for strategies that would help urban Extension professionals across the country advance successfully in their careers while having a greater impact in the communities they serve. Identifying and understanding both opportunities and barriers are critical first steps toward creating, perhaps, a new flexible career track system that meets the goals of both academia and urban Extension faculty.

Methods

The target audience of this study was Extension faculty who work in urban settings. We used a sequential mixed-method approach for data collection. Findings from interviews with eight Extension leaders were used to inform the design and development of an online survey administered to urban Extension professionals across the country, including Extension directors, and an abbreviated version with hiring systems questions sent only to human resources (HR) representatives serving Extension. Responses from the HR version of the survey were excluded from the analysis because of the low response rate. A total of 177 individuals from different parts of the U.S. (Figure 1), different genders (Figure 2) and multiple races (Figure 3) responded to the survey.

¹ The Association of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities evolved to become the Association of Public & Land-Grant Universities (APLU). <https://www.aplu.org/about-us/history-of-aplu/>

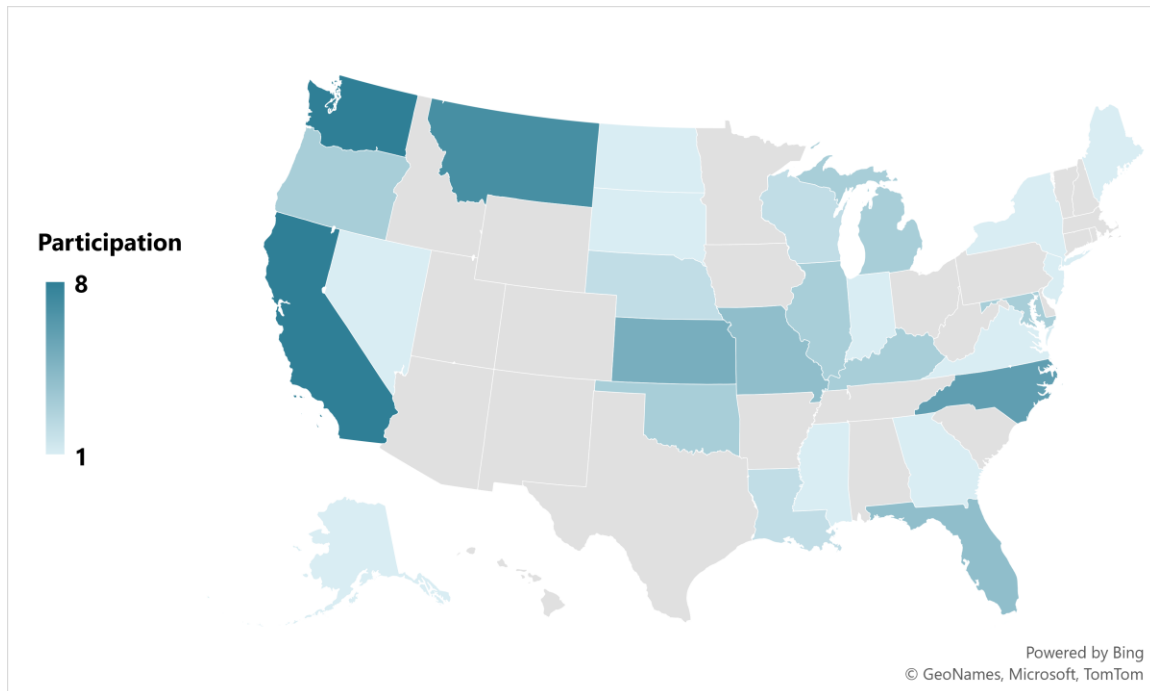


Figure 1. Geographical distribution of survey respondents

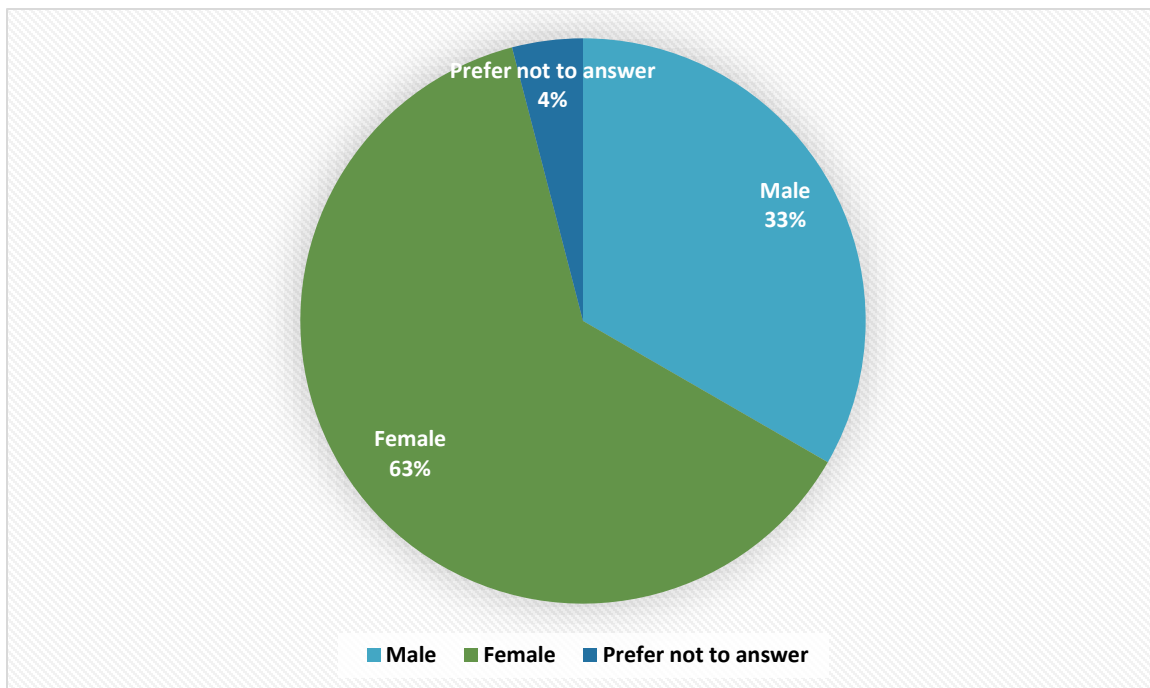


Figure 2. Gender of survey respondents

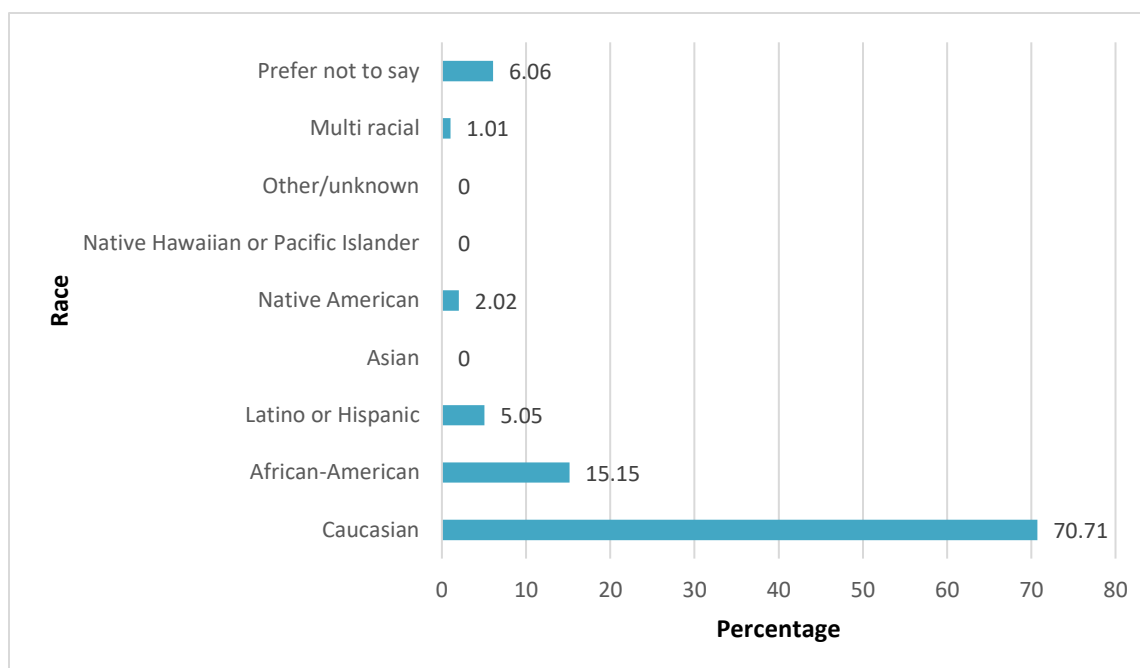


Figure 3. Race of survey respondents

Findings

Internal Processes

Urban Extension currently does not have its own hiring model. According to more than three quarters (77.45%) of the study respondents, Extension uses the university hiring systems and procedures to recruit and hire Extension faculty across the urban-rural continuum despite the differences in complexity and diversity between urban and rural areas (Figure 4). One participant from the northeast region stated, “the [name of the city] program is integrated into the university and uses university procedures for hiring.” Likewise, more than half of all respondents reported that the university HR departments dictate the hiring procedures. Urban Extension does not use a separate hiring model or procedures to recruit internally. The centralized human resources of the universities dictate both internal and external search processes and all candidates are treated generally the same way.

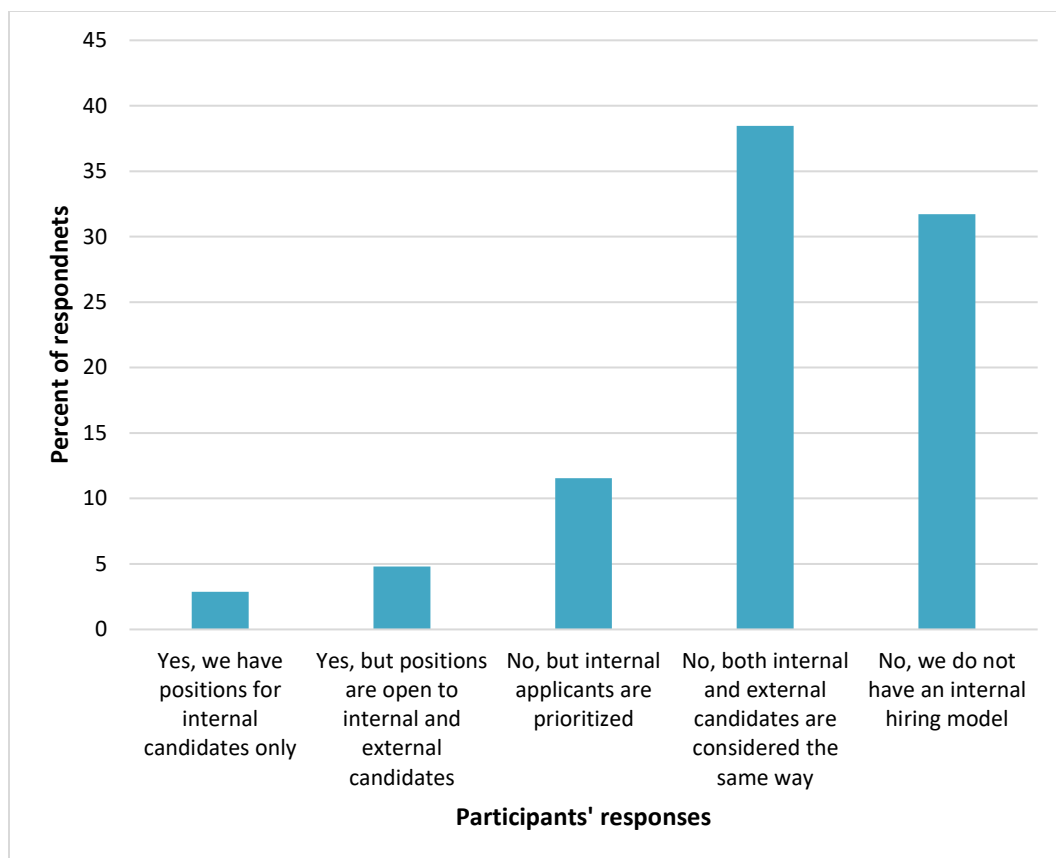


Figure 4. Does your institution have a separate internal hiring model just for Extension?

Almost a quarter of the participants reported that university hiring systems lack flexibility with job requirements. These systems still rely on academic credentials as the basis for hiring. Candidates must satisfy the requirements for academic credentials for a selected faculty job position before their experience and skills can be considered. As a result, hiring the right candidate who can perform adequately on the selected job has become a challenge and set unrealistic expectations for urban Extension faculty. “The traditional thinking about the skill sets and bias in educational background make it difficult to match job candidates’ skill sets to their roles in urban settings,” stated an Extension faculty.

Many participants reported that urban Extension still recycles old job descriptions without updating them, and that job descriptions of faculty in urban areas do not always match the needs of the community. Poorly written job descriptions increase the odds of choosing wrong candidates who cannot perform the selected job adequately and affect the organization’s competitiveness in the labor market [7].

Internal processes have not kept current with the modern workforce demands. Universities continue to hire urban Extension personnel by geography (ex. county) rather than by clientele per capita. For instance, an urban Extension educator claimed, “we have one million people with one educator.” “The unsustainable workload and expectations, lack of staff support, challenging administrative workflows, and isolation make it difficult for urban Extension faculty to achieve greater community impact,” stated another.

Internal Support

Urban Extension faculty often work with limited resources and receive limited support from administration leaders. One faculty stated, “Extension in our state has had nothing but funding cuts, increased expectations and limited support for the last 15 years. Who wants to sign up for that, urban or rural?” Another reported, “historically, no support from universities for urban Extension.” “Campus does not seem to be willing to respond in a timely manner and efforts drag out and lose momentum,” added another faculty. “Lack of acknowledgement, shortages of staff, and demands of same or more outputs/outcomes/efficiencies/layoffs has [sic] caused traumas in the lives of most of staff,” reported a participant.

Many study participants felt that the academic systems prioritize research and extension over staff and clients’ health and well-being. An urban Extension faculty claimed, “Most of my low-income communities have been over researched, but, where are the \$ [dollars] to meet the needs noted in needs assessments.” Another one stated, “Recruitments, grant RFP [request for proposal] periods, and research response times are asked for in too much of a rush, and condition changes take decades.” The focus has been more on the quantity (efficiency) rather than quality (effectiveness), especially when addressing marginalized communities. One faculty summarizes the situation as, “We keep hearing that we need to beef up urban programming, yet receive zero support.”

Compensation

The cost of living, including housing rents and food staples is much higher in urban areas than in rural areas. However, the pay that urban Extension personnel receive does not reflect this differential, putting Extension at a disadvantage for hiring and retaining personnel compared to private industry and other competing organizations. Participants ranked low pay rate as the leading cause of turnover among urban Extension faculty (Figure 5). One claimed, “... Non-competitive compensation for URBAN areas; Low Pay rate compared to rest of state. They pay the same in urban as everywhere else, but the cost of living is higher in urban.....turnover is very high everywhere in my state right now.”

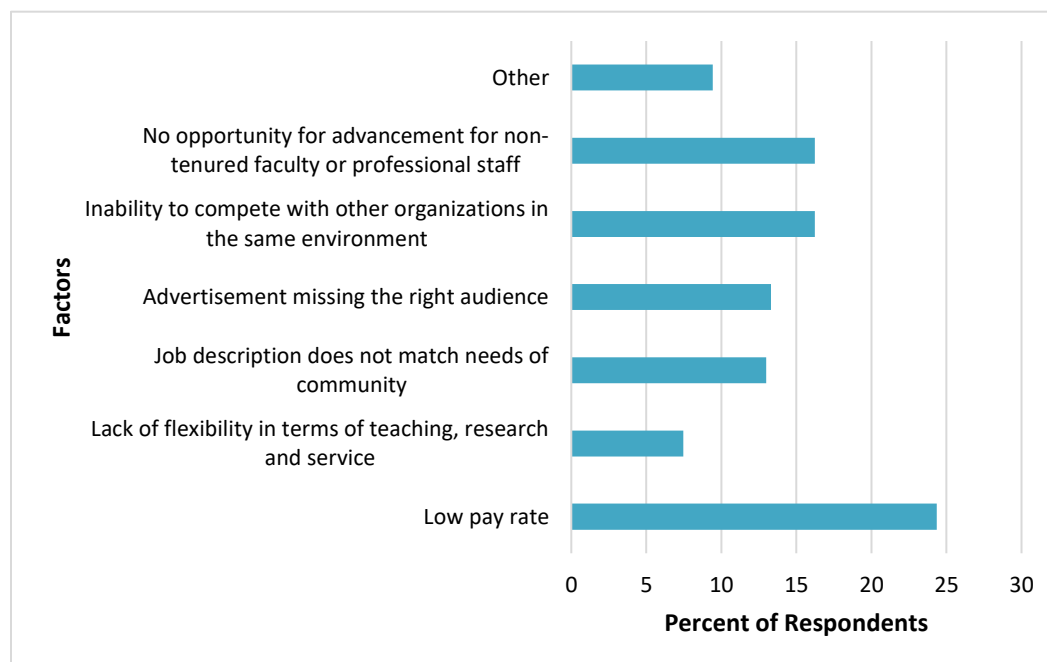


Figure 5. Leading factors of faculty turnover in urban Extension

The issue of compensation could be resolved to some degree by hiring more professional staff (non-faculty) positions, rather than faculty with academic expectations, to do some of this urban work. However, the university may still be unable to pay professional staff the salary they need to live in an urban area. One faculty stated, “Many of our local staff are part time and seek benefits, we see a lot of turnovers with those who have families and need the benefits, especially when programming on evening and weekends takes a toll on work/family balance.” Other faculty members suggested that urban Extension hire more non-tenured faculty but allow for merit-based compensations and include an opportunity for advancement.

The academic system

Many faculty suggested that urban Extension does not need more academic “experts” and, instead, needs people with demonstrated ability to work with stakeholders and bring about change on the ground. One claimed, “most important--subject matter expertise isn't always enough to bring the right people to the table.” Many suggested that urban Extension needs more people with facilitation skills. As one faculty stated, “Facilitation is more important. Campus has a lot of subject-matter experts when needed. A subject matter expert may be too focused in their approach and may be less open to community need.” Another faculty claimed that urban communities have subject matter experts available in other organizations; what is missing are people who can convene experts from those organizations and campus-based experts to address the complex, multi-faceted problems individuals, communities, governments, and industry face in urban communities.

The expert model is not what will make Extension relevant in urban settings, according to most participants. The traditional academic system can be improved by valuing facilitation and convening as it does research, adding facilitation skills and certifications to professional tenure and evaluation metrics, and ensuring that promotion and tenure committees recognize the value of convening roles in Extension. “Include it in performance evaluations and provide additional training,” reported a respondent.

Faculty divisions

The difference in treatment between tenure and non-tenure track faculty has created resentment among faculty. For instance, one faculty stated, “When I compare my end-of-the-year deliverables to PNT [promotion and tenure] positions, it makes me take a step back and wonder why I am adding so much to my plate when we have positions that do bare minimum work and have the option to keep moving up in their career.” These kinds of attitudes have affected the morale of faculty in non-tenure track positions. Another faculty claimed that “non-tenure [track] faculty are treated sometimes like they are 'less than'.” Yet another stated, “the culture of research being the only thing that matters has to change.”

The academic culture is anchored in the traditional research model and focused on having philosophical discussions about whether the results of the research are valid or not. One participant claimed that “there is little thought about how the research can be applied in the community. Well great, just published in this journal and add this to my vita and the research literature, the box is now checked. No further effort beyond this.” Another stated, “In my opinion this is a major reason why public funding for higher education had declined significantly over the past 25 years.”

Participants reported a disparity in pay between on campus and urban Extension faculty. One stated, “I have field faculty on my staff who have PhD's and their rate of pay is lower than those on campus and in comparable positions.” This lack of recognition, by university administrative leaders, of the value of extension work in the community has affected the morale of urban Extension faculty. Another participant stated, “we (Extension) are often seen as 'less than' our on-campus

counterparts and they don't really understand what we do." This has led urban Extension faculty to question whether their on-campus colleagues should be involved in their promotion and tenure evaluation. As one urban Extension faculty stated, "Campus-based faculty with no Extension experience who provide input into file assessments have difficulty understanding the importance of this work and the amount of time it takes to give one."

Academia is very disconnected from the day-to-day workings of Extension professionals. "They rarely know the audience we work with and it shows. All research is not what we do. Academia has to first value the applied value of research and how it benefits the people," argued one faculty. Participants indicated that a new track may not be needed, but administrators need to be trained on how to see the value in the work of urban Extension professionals. They continued to argue that Extension professionals face unique challenges working in urban environments, but they do not always receive recognition for the additional obstacles they must overcome to be successful. Extension needs different metrics for reporting that recognize the complexities of urban work - larger populations, more diversity and greater competition - and give credit for building strategic partnerships and networking, reported many participants in the study.

Diversifying the workforce

There has been a lack of focus on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in Extension, reported faculty in the study. For instance, a participant who self-identified as white stated, "I think I hear that faculty of color have a hard time working in a pwi [predominantly white institution], where bad things happen so they put up with it or leave." Another faculty argued, "Lack of belonging in [the] overall organization is a major issue that needs to be addressed." Participants stated that many faculty of color who provide programs and education in the community, then have to take on the additional role of helping their colleagues with DEI issues, and even translation, yet this work is not valued in the tenure process. In addition, they reported that Extension must embrace diversity, offer opportunities to support diversity, use better tools to measure impact and, specifically, to value efforts to increase diversity and equity.

Extension applies the one size fits all model to its operations and is, consequently, falling behind with managing and hiring their workforce, reported the respondents in the study. "The system is outdated. I am always in favor of a context-informed system, an understanding of the urban complex better by traditional processes," claimed an Extension educator. Extension needs to provide flexible work arrangements, focus less on formal credentials, and provide competitive salaries if it wants to meet the modern workforce demands in urban areas. In addition, Extension needs to target recruitment and retention of ethnically and linguistically diverse candidates who will contribute to a wider set of experiences, backgrounds, and relationships to urban Extension. For more highly specialized positions, Extension should look for applicants who have grassroots experience, increased skills in working with diverse audiences, and skills in building relationships with underserved audiences to meet the growing, diverse and complex urban community needs.

The urban Extension workforce is not as diverse as the populations it serves. When filling vacant positions, Extension should advertise positions in places where they are most likely to attract a more diverse pool of candidates. This could include partnering with other urban organizations locally and regionally to get diverse candidates, reaching out beyond just university sites to minority serving institutions (e.g., HBCUs, tribal organizations, etc.) and BIPOC communities for recruitment, utilizing social media strategies, and posting positions via paid venues.

Urban Extension could also build employment pipelines through internships and partnerships. For instance, a participant suggested that the system should "Provide urban internship programs;

utilize local coalitions for recruiting.” Other faculty made further suggestions such as creating internships that introduce students from urban areas to Extension, and expanding the pipeline for urban Extension by offering specific internships for urban high school and collegiate students.” These measures may not only help increase the relevance and visibility of urban Extension in the community, but also attract an excellent, diverse pool of talent across the country.

Faculty reported that, before writing position descriptions or reading the resumes, search committees themselves should be diverse. The committee should engage in conversation of the role bias plays in hiring, ensure that positions descriptions and interview questions use language that will be inclusive of BIPOC applicants, and weigh applicants’ responses to questions related to diversity, equity and inclusion the same as questions about teaching and research. According to a participant, “Faculty that serve on committees should be trained to recognize different ‘experience’ as more valuable- I mean, not saying ‘oh, this person already does ‘our type’ of job somewhere else, so that’s more valuable than experience outside of Extension.”

Process improvements

Streamlining the hiring process to be shorter and less complex is also critical, argued study participants. The notice of vacancy should include information about Extension, a detailed job description accurately describing what skills are needed to perform the job adequately, notification that evening and weekend work may be required, specific subject area of the position (ex. horticulture, 4-H), and a brief description of the university’s promotion system. The notice of vacancy should also reduce expectations with respect to prior Extension experience and accept other relevant experience. Faculty stated that the university should be willing pay Extension personnel in urban counties more, relative to personnel in non-urban counties, and detail the dollar value of benefits up front. Additionally, they recommended the university provide more upfront information about location and lifestyle in the area, assistance with finding a place to live, and a housing supplement at all levels if selected candidates live in or move to an urban area. Respondents felt that the system should offer competitive salaries to help compensate for higher costs of housing and limited availability, and value experience over education while allowing and creating paths to obtaining necessary degrees while in the position.

Recommendations

Issue: University hiring procedures and policies fail to recognize the unique challenges and opportunities of urban Extension. Using a one size fits all approach has affected the ability of urban Extension to recruit and train a qualified workforce able to increase Extension’s impact and expand services to non-traditional target audiences. Universities still require that candidates satisfy formal academic credentials making it difficult to match job candidates to the experience and skill sets required to be successful in urban settings.

Recommendation:

- Streamline the hiring procedures and provide flexibility with job requirements, allowing urban Extension to hire candidates who may not satisfy formal academic credential requirements but demonstrate extensive relevant experience. If academic credentials are truly critical, then provide incoming faculty who do not satisfy the academic credential requirements with opportunities to further advance their education.

Issue: Once hired, many urban Extension personnel receive little to no administrative support and are often paid less than their campus counterparts, despite the higher cost of living in urban areas. In many states, urban Extension faculty also receive little support from the administrative leaders. These disparities have affected the morale of the urban Extension workforce.

Recommendations:

- Provide flexible work arrangements to attract and retain high quality, diverse talent such as people of color, women, single parents, and people with disabilities.
- Offer short-term, project focused or seasonal, expert-based employment opportunities outside of the traditional academic system.
- Provide urban faculty with competitive salaries to help compensate for the high cost of living in urban areas.
- Provide administrative support to faculty allowing them to focus on having optimum urban Extension impact.

Issue: The urban Extension workforce is not as diverse as the populations it serves. Extension could target recruitment and retention of ethnically and linguistically diverse candidates who will contribute to a wider set of experiences, backgrounds, and relationships in urban Extension. However, diverse faculty frequently experience a lack of belonging in the organization due to an overall lack of focus on diversity, equity and inclusion.

Recommendations:

- Develop and expand networks and partnerships with BIPOC and other community and organizational partners, including HBCUs, to recruit a diverse pool of talent.
- Require that search committee members be diverse and trained to recognize and value different experiences, including non-Extension experience, engage in conversation of the role bias plays, use language that will be inclusive of BIPOC applicants, and weigh applicants' responses to DEI-related questions the same as those related to teaching and research.
- Build employment pipelines through internships and partnerships. Create internships that introduce high school and college students from urban areas to Extension.
- Advertise positions in places where they are most likely to attract a diverse pool of candidates and develop metrics to assess equity.

Issue: The traditional academic model's lack of flexibility makes it difficult for urban Extension professionals to advance successfully in their careers. In particular, it undervalues the convening role required of Extension personnel to help address the complex, multi-faceted problems that individuals, communities, governments, and industry face in urban communities.

Recommendations:

- Prioritize quality over quantity in programming and scholarly outputs.
- Recognize and value the convening roles in urban Extension and establish training and development programs to increase faculty's facilitation skills.
- Use different metrics for reporting that recognize the complexities of urban Extension work (larger populations, greater diversity, more competition) and give credit for creating partnerships, and networking.
- Bridge the gap between urban Extension faculty and their campus counterparts and adopt a tenure model that is more equitable to urban Extension faculty.

Issue:

Upon examining the findings of this study, it becomes evident that the traditional academic model or system is antiquated, and inadequate to produce the desired community change and impact in urban areas. Land grant universities need to adopt a novel approach that recognizes the growing complexity and diversity of urban communities, to ensure that urban Extension remains viable and relevant.

Recommendations:

- Create opportunities to increase open communication and dialogues between faculty and administrative leaders about the existing model, and brainstorm what would work best for them. Individuals with institutional power must also be part of the conversation to give it credence.
- Elevate the stature of urban Extension within the academic system.
- Although change is needed, the system also needs to elevate and promote our past and present, preserve the institutional knowledge that is being lost as employee leave Extension, and ensure that Extension is no longer our best kept secret.

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About the Authors

Dr. Jeantyl Norze is an Associate Professor for Organizational Accountability & Evaluation for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture Research & Extension (UA). He received his Doctor of Veterinary Medicine from the Agrarian University of Havana in Cuba, and his Master of Science in Human Resource Development and Leadership and his Ph.D. in Agricultural Extension from Louisiana State University. He joined University of Nevada, Reno Extension in Clark County in 2019 as the coordinator for program evaluation where he began the fellowship with the Western Center for Metropolitan Extension and Research. He then worked as a Program Development and Evaluation Specialist for the University of Connecticut before arriving at UA for his current appointment. Dr. Norze has served as a reviewer for federal grants and multiple journals including American Evaluation Association and Academy of Management where he was recognized as the 2022 best reviewer for Strategizing Activities and Practices.

Eric Killian is the University of Nevada Reno Extension Southern Area Director. He oversees the daily activities for Clark, Lincoln and southern Nye Counties. In this role, he provides leadership to over 160 faculty and staff in three counties, 10 offices and a multi-million dollar budget. Killian has held leadership positions and key roles with most of the national Children, Youth, and Family Extension initiatives of the past 25 years, including Youth-at-Risk programming, CYFAR, 4-H Afterschool, Extension Cares, and Military Partnerships. His contributions to Extension programming and his involvement in several national initiatives have helped shape the direction, focus, and sustainability of these programs nationwide. Over his tenure, Killian has worked at the county, area and state level with three university systems where he led program planning, staff development and management, training efforts and fostered relationships/partnerships with other organizations to further Extension's reach and mission.

