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Perspectives: The Entrepreneurial Extension Service

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The modern era demands that Cooperative Extension change the way it does business. Over the last decade, the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service (CES) has lost dozens of county-level, state-funded positions through budget cuts and early retirement incentives. While positions have disappeared across program areas, Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) has been particularly hard hit. The number of county-level FCS agents has dwindled to such an extent that the ability to continue programming for families is at risk. If Georgia continues to lose positions at the same rate the state has experienced over the last decade, the current decade could well see the end of FCS Extension.

For much of the last decade, the University of Georgia-Athens (UGA) has responded to dwindling budget allocations by reconfiguring staffing patterns. In addition to reducing the number of districts, the state's 159 counties were divided into two, three, or four county clusters with one FCS agent assigned to each cluster. FCS agents were encouraged to concentrate their programming in one or two "focus" areas identified by state specialists so as not to spread themselves too thin. Georgia's FCS focus areas are food safety, chronic disease prevention, family care giving, housing, and consumer economics.

There is a growing awareness that four county clusters are simply not workable. Already Georgia has closed two county Extension offices, withdrawing services from those communities entirely. Plans are now underway to withdraw FCS programming from two counties in every four-county cluster. In many cases, the poorest counties where the need for CES is arguably the greatest will no longer have access to FCS educational programs. State faculty continue to discuss how to respond to requests from these abandoned counties for state-level support.

Growing concerns among state faculty about the ability to continue delivering programs with a dwindling field staff led to discussions about how to respond proactively. State specialists and administration agreed that increasing the number of local educators was the number one priority in order to maintain the integrity, quality, and existence of FCS programming in Georgia. While securing external funding has always been a priority, most grant-funded projects focused primarily upon materials development and relied upon existing staff for program delivery. Specialists were encouraged to seek support for program delivery. This was essential because existing field staff were already far too overwhelmed to take on a new grant project.

At the state level, the Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program and the Expanded Foods & Nutrition Education Program already funded a significant percentage of many FCS county positions. Particularly in metro areas, FCS agents had also been successful at securing local funding for professional and paraprofessional positions to deliver specific programs to targeted audiences. Evidence suggested that the ability to secure funding for a general FCS educator was limited. Funding was much more likely to be available for specialized agents and program assistants. Moreover, where specialized staff could be hired, generalists have been able to focus more on other content areas and rely upon the specialized staff for support as needed.

FCS programming has changed dramatically over the years. Early on, the focus was on direct education through home visits. The homemaker club model proved to be a more efficient means of program delivery and quickly replaced home visits as the way FCS did business. Trends converged to render the homemaker club model obsolete in Georgia, and FCS entered an era of collaboration. Welfare reform facilitated the trend towards collaboration and shifted the focus more toward limited resource families and train-the-trainer programs.

The current evolution of Extension roles relies more upon the county agent as a facilitator and entrepreneur. Unbiased, research-based information is still the core of FCS Extension. But, instead of primarily working directly with local residents to help them improve their quality of life, the new focus is working at the community level to address local issues. Rather than actually delivering educational programs, progressive agents set up ongoing, sustainable programs that are delivered by volunteers or staff paid through grants. The direct education they do is targeted to decision-makers, community leaders, and businesses. This is a critical paradigm shift that is rarely discussed. Yet understanding this change is critical to growing a program in an era of ongoing cuts.

Another factor influencing this change in how we program is the increasing importance of accountability. No longer is it sufficient to report the number of people who participated in a program or received information. The key to securing funding in the current environment is to demonstrate an economic impact. We need to be able to prove that every dollar invested In FCS Extension provides a significant return to the state and local economies.

UGA FCS has pursued external funding to hire field staff for a variety of programs across FCS program areas. Locally, FCS agents have received funding to hire educators to teach parenting skills to parents in the child protective services system, life skills to TANF recipients (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families), and financial management through Department of

Labor one-stop centers to the unemployed. A statewide passenger safety grant funded staff to deliver programs promoting correct and consistent use of child safety seats and safety belts. External funding will also allow FCS to hire part-time educators around the state to help families reduce and eliminate their exposure to radon gas. In some locations, local dollars bring the part-time Radon Educator positions to full-time, with the additional time allocated to other FCS content areas.

Given the essential emphasis upon economic impact, perhaps no other content area lends itself to this model as well as consumer economics. Educational programs revolving around financial literacy, fraud prevention, and workforce preparedness can, more easily than most, be evaluated for economic impact. Extension needs to be alert to opportunities. The reality is that the bulk of external funding does not come from proposals submitted in response to calls. Instead, funding comes through the leveraging of partnerships.

Georgia perennially has one of the highest bankruptcy rates in the nation, with the Atlanta area accounting for a significant portion of the nation's bankruptcies. FCS CES entered into a partnership with the Standing Chapter 13 Trustee for the Northern District of Georgia to provide financial management workshops for individuals who recently filed Chapter 13. Nearly 500 individuals participated in the 6-month pilot project completed last December, and continued for 2003. Each participant completed a pre- and post-test, and will soon receive a follow-up survey by mail. The pilot relied upon existing agents when feasible (with compensation to the county for each workshop) and two part-time educators.

The most promising program, however, is the newly funded Consumer Financial Literacy Program (CFLP). Modeled after the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), the CFLP focuses on promoting financial literacy for targeted audiences in an 11-county service area in rural Georgia. The program, implemented by two professional-level educators and five program assistants, revolves around four main components.

1. The adult program targets working poor families (up to 200 percent of federal poverty levels) for one-on-one or small group education where they live or work for an extended period of time.

2. The youth program targets all youth in the service area with age-appropriate personal finance programs.

3. The cornerstone of the CFLP is the tax program. Program staff received training, computers, and certification from the IRS to prepare and electronically file tax returns. The goals of this component are to make sure eligible families file taxes to receive tax

credits, to help them avoid the cost of professional tax preparation, and to discourage the use of high-cost refund anticipation loans.

4. Finally, program staff implement and deliver programs as needed for targeted populations, such as individuals who bounce checks or are denied loans from banks.

The Georgia Governor's Office of Consumer Affairs funds the CFLP with dollars received by the state through the Bridgestone/Firestone settlement. Settlements similar to the Bridgestone/Firestone case are bringing millions of dollars into states. In most cases, the settlement language mandates that the funds be used for consumer education. For example, the Georgia Secretary of State's Office recently received significant funding for investor education through the Merrill-Lynch settlement. The key to accessing these dollars is developing relationships with the state entities that receive them.

The shift to an entrepreneurial Extension Service is not without challenges. The 4-year planning cycle does not lend itself to the kind of flexibility needed to capitalize on opportunities. Too often the timeline is too short for our massive bureaucracy to respond, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to negotiate indirect costs. It is often difficult to hire and train new staff in a timely and efficient manner resulting in lengthy delays from receipt of funds to program implementation. Such delays substantially dilute program impacts and may prove devastating to pilot projects.

External funding also generates more demand for management support and increases the level of reporting. It is important to keep these increased demands in mind when developing project budgets. One option is to build in fractions of support positions that are easily shared across content areas, such as Web masters, clerical support, and technical assistants that can be combined across the unit for full- or part-time positions.

Locally, Extension needs to be much more aggressive about telling its story. The three-legged stool that has funded Extension until now (federal, state, and county funds) is simply not adequate. The new model calls for additional funding from cities, municipalities, foundations, and businesses. The true measure of local support for Extension is the ability to attract dollars from local entities for programs that make a difference on the ground.

States can facilitate the transition to an entrepreneurial Extension Service in a number of ways. Administration needs to support the transition of county agents from educators to community facilitators, and communicate clearly that expectations have changed. Performance measures need to be modified and incentives created to reward entrepreneurial activity. Procedures for submitting and approving grants and contracts need to be streamlined, along with university processes for modifying indirect cost requirements. Staff members need training in how to secure external funding through existing collaborations and partnerships, including grant-writing, program evaluation, and impact reporting. This training should emphasize how to establish new positions within the system and guidelines for hiring, housing, and managing project staff.

At the national level, mechanisms for sharing projects, funding sources, and impact data across the system need to be developed. Data from a successful pilot in one community can be used to plead the case for funding elsewhere. More staff are needed to develop relationships and partnerships with national funding sources, including major corporations and foundations.

The opinions and viewpoints expressed in this article are the opinions and viewpoints of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions and viewpoints of the individuals and organizations who support FFCI.

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