

## Chapter 3

# COMMUNITY VITALITY

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## C.D.S. Principles of Good Practice

The Community Development Society (an international group of educators and practitioners) have developed and adopted a set of “principles” as a guide to what community development means and what community development practitioners should strive towards in their work. These principles include:

- *Promote active and representative participation* toward enabling all community members to meaningfully influence the decisions that affect their lives.
- *Engage community members in learning about and understanding community issues*, and the economic, social, environmental, political, psychological, and other impacts associated with alternative courses of action.
- *Incorporate the diverse interests and cultures of the community* in the community development process; and disengage from support of any effort that is likely to adversely affect disadvantaged members of a community.
- *Work actively to enhance the leadership capacity* of community members, leaders, and groups within the community.
- *Be open to using the full range of action strategies* to work toward the long-term sustainability and well-being of the community.

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## **Cornell Cooperative Extension**

Cornell Cooperative Extension has adopted these same principles and applied them towards defining the roles of C.C.E. and Extension educators. One of Cornell Cooperative Extension's main programs is the Community and Economic Vitality Initiative. The C.E.V.I. is explained in a little further detail below.

### **Community and Economic Vitality Initiative**

- Cornell Cooperative Extension's role is to strengthen the social and economic vitality of communities.
- All of Cornell Cooperative Extension's Educators are involved in this initiative, which provides a framework within which to work while allowing flexibility to undertake varied approaches. Strategies and programs can be carried out at the scale of the neighborhood, county, regional or State, with emphasis at the community level.
- The work in this program arena provides opportunities for integrating extension, research, and learning in the service of community planning and development.
- Extension Educators are community builders. They can facilitate the processes that lead to increased community capacity and the building of greater social capital.
- Educators can help to build a shared vision of a community's future. They can collaboratively design and deliver educational programs that make significant impacts. Extension educators help communities by being available to follow up and move long-term community projects forward.
- C.C.E.'s strategic advantage is in linking economic prosperity, community well-being, and environmental protection in a holistic and unified approach.
- The overall vision of C.C.E. is to help create strong, vital, healthy and lasting communities.

### **Principles of Community and Economic Vitality Initiative**

- We promote active and representative participation toward enabling all community members to meaningfully influence the decisions that affect their lives.
- We engage community members in learning about and understanding community issues, and the economic, social, environmental, and political impacts associated with alternative courses of action.
- We incorporate the diverse interests and cultures of the community into the community development process.
- We work actively to enhance the leadership capacity of community members, leaders, and groups within the community.

- We also work toward the long-term sustainability and well-being of communities by:
  - Encouraging strategic planning and vision development.
  - Identifying assets and building from local resources and skills.
  - Meeting local needs with local sources.
  - Developing the number and qualities of the local workforce.
  - Considering quality of life issues for all age groups.
  - Protecting working and natural landscapes.
  - Considering environmental impacts – the land, water, air, plants and animals.
  - Supporting existing businesses.
  - Encouraging new local enterprises.
  - Developing value-adding industries for local products.
  - Striving to increase earnings within the community and decrease expenditures outside the community.
  - Enabling the community to invest in itself.
  - Fostering private-public collaborations and partnerships with business, government and the academy.

Cornell Cooperative Extension, through the efforts of C.C.E. educators, seeks to assist communities in various ways while making the difficult decisions inherent in any comprehensive community planning and development process. Several of the general guidelines that C.C.E. educators follow while partnering with community leaders and residents in helping communities making these important choices are as follows:

1. Building the capacity for vital and healthy communities.
2. Developing informed citizen participation.
3. Developing, expanding and retaining a community's agricultural industry.
4. Developing the local workforce.
5. Fostering healthy families and community services.
6. Promoting life-long learning.
7. Improving community services.
8. Protecting the natural environment while increasing economic vitality.
9. Promoting and encouraging the “sustainability” of communities.

Cornell Cooperative Extension educators also seek to partner with local elected officials and community leaders to better facilitate the planning process. In this way, C.C.E educators and facilitators can help communities to do the following:

1. Determine when their community is ready to engage in an action planning or visioning process.
2. Create and organize a community planning process that is participatory in nature, including all citizens, officials, and stakeholders; and that focuses primarily on community purpose, vision, action planning, and implementation.
3. Develop follow-up strategies and provide assistance to sustain the community's energy and momentum as it implements short-term and longer-term strategies for creating a more sustainable and secure future.

One of the largest problems facing many local governments is human resources. It takes extensive time, energy and effort to build the partnerships and coalitions necessary for community action. Extension educators can help communities by being available to follow up and move long-term community projects forward so local officials can balance day-to-day activities without losing sight of their long-range goals.

Cornell Cooperative Extension Associations are uniquely positioned to provide unbiased assistance and education to communities to help them achieve their goals. Educators can provide the kind of initial facilitation and organizational expertise necessary for a successful visioning process, thereby assisting communities to improve or enhance their quality of life.

## **The Mission of Cooperative Extension Service**

When the Cooperative Extension Service was first established in the early 1900's, Cooperative Extension agents represented the state's land-grant University in each of the counties throughout a particular state. A Cooperative Extension agent served primarily as an instructor in both agriculture and home economics. The agent provided assistance ranging from educational training to farmers throughout the county to providing youth development opportunities throughout rural America. In most cases only one agent was assigned to a particular county.

That one agent handled all of the responsibilities mandated to the Cooperative Extension Service under the Smith-Lever Act of 1914. The mission mandated by the Smith-Lever Act was "to aid in diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture and home economics, and to encourage the application of the same." This mission has evolved somewhat through the years, and now states that "Extension shall enable people to improve the lives and communities through learning partnerships that put knowledge to work" (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, 1995).

The mission of the Cooperative Extension Service was eventually interpreted so that educational training and assistance was provided in four areas. These four areas are Agriculture, Home Economics (now referred to as Family and Consumer Sciences) 4H Youth Development, and Community Development. As the years progressed, agent positions were created for each of these subject areas. Many counties throughout the Cooperative Extension System now have agents teaching in one or more of these categories.

## **The Role of Community Development Agents**

The Community Development Division of the Ohio State University Extension service helps individuals and communities to identify and meet local needs with useful information, educational programming, planning, and practical implementation through collaborative efforts with individuals, organizations, and groups to enhance the well-being of communities. In Ohio agents work in two areas: Community Development and Community Economic Development. A Community Development Agent works on programming activities related to the overall well-being of a community. A Community Economic Development Agent works on programming focused on improving the local economy.

In 1994, the Ohio State University Extension, Community Development Division developed a five-year strategic plan for carrying out programmatic activities. The division identified four critical services that Community Development and Community Economic Development Agents were to perform in developing county programs:

1. Provide a perspective on local development issues.
2. Increase the knowledge-base for individual and community decisions.
3. Develop the skills necessary to achieve individual and community goals.
4. Help to shape the decision-making environment.

Each agent assigned to a county is asked to develop a program for either Community Development or Community Economic Development, or both. This depends on the focus that was desired by a particular county when its agent position was developed.

## **Profiles of Extension Educators**

{excerpt from "WE GROW PEOPLE" – Profiles of Extension Educators. Scott Peters & Margo Hittlman}

To view the work of extension educators as part of a developmental leadership tradition is not to view it in some radically new way. Rather, it takes one right back to extension's historical roots. Seaman A. Knapp, often described as the "father" of the extension movement, was known to argue that the real yardstick for measuring the success of extension teaching was contained in the phrase: "and the man grew faster than the crop."

We find the same perspective in the following two quotations. The first is taken from a national survey of land-grant institutions, a comprehensive two-volume study published in 1930 by the federal Office of Education:

*"The ultimate objective was not more and better food, clothing, and housing. These were merely means and conditions prerequisite to improvement of human relationships, of intellectual and spiritual outlook. Apparent preoccupation with economic interests must be interpreted in terms of the purposes that material welfare is intended to serve. The fundamental function of Smith-Lever extension education is the development of rural people themselves. This is accomplished by fostering attitudes of mind and capacities which will enable them to better meet the individual and civic problems with which they are confronted. Unless economic attainment and independence are regarded chiefly as means for advancing the social and cultural life of those living in the open country, the most important purpose of extension education will not be achieved."*

The second excerpt is taken from a paper that A.E. Bowman, director of extension in Wyoming, wrote in 1934 in connection with the twentieth anniversary of the Smith-Lever Act, which created the national Cooperative Extension Service:

*“The Extension Service, while seeming to deal chiefly with the economic problems involved in helping the producer secure a greater income from his farm, and his wife to manage the home with greater economy and less effort, has contributed to rural society something vastly more important than a knowledge of improved practices and greater income. To induce men and women and boys and girls to come together to think collectively, plan collectively, and then act collectively to bring about desired conditions, does something to the individual. It gives opportunity, the greatest boon to mankind, for self-expression and development. It is not the acquisition of more lands or more cattle or more home equipment that brings greater happiness. It is the “finding of one’s self,” the development of leadership, improved skills, increased knowledge, broadened understanding, and greater appreciation attained by individual taking part in community activities set afoot by the Extension Service that measures its value in rural people.”*

Both of these passages remind us, in an almost eerily precise way, of the central lesson we learned from the CUCE-NYC educators: “it’s not about the rice.”

If a developmental leadership tradition is deeply rooted in extension history, what explains the predominance of the narrow “technical assistance” language used to describe extension’s mission and work today? To answer this question, we need to confront the fact that a broad human and community development-centered understanding of extension’s mission and work is – and has always been – in tension with a narrower technical understanding. In part, this tension is rooted in genuine disagreements among educators and administrators about how human and community development can or should be pursued. Some believe that human services and community development are by-products of economic development; from this perspective, extension’s main emphasis should be placed on developing and disseminating the technical skills and knowledge that can help enhance economic efficiency and productivity. Others disagree, believing that human and community development must be prioritized and fostered directly, or risk becoming devalued and lost.

However, the tension extends beyond disagreements over strategy and tactics. The emphasis on a narrow technical view of extension’s mission and works was – and is – also shaped by powerful political and economic forces and actors that have tried to mold universities’ activities, including their extension activities, to a particular set of values and interests. These include prioritizing national economic growth, “competitiveness” and private corporate agendas, without serious regard as to what the consequences may be with respect to social conditions or community development.

## **Conclusion**

This brief chapter has described some of the history, principles and values, and contemporary activities of Cornell Cooperative Extension and related educators and practitioners. While the principles and values enumerated as part of Extension’s historical and present mission, these tenets of good community planning and economic development practice can also find relevance in other communities across the country looking to collectively shape their own future, as well as serving as a good example for educators, scholars, facilitators and other community leaders not necessarily affiliated with Extension offices.