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Philosophical Paper

Extension Workers as Orchestrators of Civic Renewal
Through Civic Professionalism

By

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I have a passion and a bias. I am passionate about the important role of the Cooperative Extension System (CES) in civic renewal. My bias is that extension workers (also known as agents or educators) are the key to civic renewal throughout the United States. No other institution has the same ability to reach all of America with education and organizing efforts. With extension workers in every county in the nation, this group of professionals and their work cut across age, race, ethnicity, religion, geography and many other demographic characteristics. Extension has a long history of being active in civic renewal from public health projects in the 1920’s to youth citizenship work of today’s 4-H after school clubs.

A national extension task force states, “the Cooperative Extension System has a vital role to play in its continuing effort to strengthen educational opportunities in community leadership for its publics (National Extension Task Force for Community Leadership, 1987,p.2).” A recent study also finds that above all else, CES leaders are expected to be good citizens (Joseph & Aldag, 2000). Finally, the public’s disenchantment with professionals reinforces the need “to create a new professionalism that has a civic character (Mathews, 1996, p.25).” All of these points require that CES take a close look at its professional workforce and move whole heartedly towards rebuilding civic professionalism in extension workers.

I propose that CES could best build civic professionalism in its ranks by embracing a triad of competencies -- community leadership, ethical wisdom and civic commitment. None of these competencies stands alone in reclaiming civic professionalism. Their interrelatedness requires a holistic approach to helping extension workers reclaim the civic aspects of their public work.
In this paper I will examine civil society and why it matters, the civic professionalism of extension workers through community leadership, ethical wisdom and civic commitment, the role of the extension worker in civic renewal and practices that move extension workers towards increased capacity for civic professionalism. The last section includes practical recommendations for building the civic capacity of extension workers.

What is Civil Society and Why Does it Matter?

There are many definitions of civil society found in the literature. They range from strong democracy (Barber, 1998) to a place where people create the good life (Walzer, 1998) to citizens putting forth their public interests through collective action (CIVICUS, 1999). I find the public work focus of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship the most appropriate for CES. The center strives for a commonwealth vision of civil society where the people as a whole are citizens who join together in public work to produce and sustain the commonwealth (Boyte, Kari, Lewis, NanSkelton, & O'Donoghue, 1999). Harry Boyte, one of the Center’s founders, defines public work as “freely chosen, sustained, and visible public effort, paid or unpaid, by a mix of people who undertake projects of civic usefulness (p. 72).” This definition clearly supports the work being done by many extension workers and also provides a civic compass for renewing civil society.

I define civil society as the integrated efforts of business, government and civil society in building a public spirit through public work for the good of all. This work is based on an ethic of caring (Noddings, 1984) where volunteerism is essential and ethics are seen as a concept of action. The integration of the three sectors provides a variety of ways for people to be engaged in civil society. I believe that business and government sectors rest in a base of civil society rather than seen as detached from civil society. I place education and politics
as forces surrounding and shaping all three sectors. In turn, the sectors shape education and politics (figure 1). The intersection of the three sectors is the space for CES efforts and the home of extension workers.

Figure 1. The role of CES in civil society

So why does civil society matter and why should CES be concerned about it? In the figure above, civil society is the base for business and government to operate from successfully. One cannot do well without the other (Korten, 1998). Civil society can also make us happier (Minnich, 1999) and it provides public spaces for democratic life and pluralism to take place (VanRooy, 1998). Above all, civil society allows for a focus on personal and group agency not possible as extensively in the sectors of business and government. Civil society is a place to share power (Bryson & Crosby, 1992) and for people to generate their own power (Mathews, 1996). I agree with critical theorists that civic work should be people centered, problem centered and work towards changing power relationships (Forester, 1989). This is especially true for the public work of CES, where a major role of extension workers is to negotiate power and interests on behalf of the people with whom they work (Cervero & Wilson, 1994). Extension workers could best see their civic efforts as working towards a better way or in the words of their own 4-H motto, “to make the best better.”
What is Civic Professionalism for Extension Workers?

William Sullivan states that, “the professional, guided by an understanding of public responsibility, could be trusted to render what was needed. By combining learning, skill, and public service professionalism itself became an ethical ideal (1995, p. 193). The technical side of professional work is still important but civic renewal requires professionals to add civic awareness and ethics as strong daily companions (Sullivan, 1995). A more practical view is that “the technical connection was swallowed up in friendship, in mutual regard and loyalty (Berry, 1986).” The words of these authors support the need for CES civic professionals to be competent in community leadership, ethical wisdom and civic commitment in their public work.

Community Leadership

Extension workers have been historically seen as leaders in the communities in which they work. One of the most important aspects of successful community leadership is building relationships. This has also been true for successful extension work (Reader, 1979). One extension scholar sees leaders in adult education as orchestra conductors (Apps, 1994). I would add that extension workers as community leaders are orchestrators of civic renewal through the building and sustainability of community relationships and other leadership roles.

Community leadership work also requires attention to politics at a number of levels. Every civic setting is political from the local co-creation of public work (Boyte, 1999a) to the citizen politics involved in multi-community, county, regional, state and national work. One historian states that, “with so many bosses to please, Extension workers have simply had to keep the program flexible (Reader, 1979, p. 98).” I would add that everyone is the extension worker’s boss, which requires political awareness as well as savvy in analyzing and utilizing
power relationships in civic renewal. Many extension workers have found their job on the line when they have not paid attention to politics in their work as community leaders. Effective community leadership is foremost shaped by politics and secondly by ethics.

Ethical Wisdom

Extension work is always value laden (Laue, 1979) resulting in the need for extension workers to gain and utilize ethical wisdom. An extension worker’s code of ethics from 1926 states, “remember that public servants are ambitious to succeed; but we are first, ethical men (sic) who wish no success that is not founded on the highest justice and morality (Pennsylvania Association of County Agricultural Extension Representatives, 1926, p. 2).” I suggest that instead of the professional distancing themselves from their publics (McKnight, 1995), it is more important for extension workers to listen closely to the public and to exhibit an ethic of caring. This means being responsible for the results of their actions on those with whom they work and others less directly involved in their efforts. This responsibility for actions builds trust through accountability (Sockett, 1993), one of the most common obligations for leaders uttered by the public today.

One promoter of civic renewal states that, “ethical choices challenge us at every turn as we work for the goals of civil society (CIVICUS, 1999, p.184).” What people expect is that extension workers as community leaders will “take proper care in how they reach their decisions (Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 1988, p.76).” I would add that it is critical that extension workers also care deeply about those affected by their decisions. An ethic of caring (Noddings, 1984) is the ethical theory that best fits CES public work. I find the Mill’s utilitarianism theory, Kohlberg’s theory of moral development and Kant’s ethical theory based on duty are not inclusive of the passion and other emotions necessary to carry out the
public work of civic renewal. Nodding’s theory importantly grounds the civic professionalism of extension workers in values and ethics that support the engaged university challenge that many Land Grant institutions are facing today.

*Civic Commitment*

This commitment must come from a core of civic will, found at the center of every extension worker’s vision for their profession. As public servants, civic will must be the soul of extension work. Strong civic will leads to civic commitment through the educational work usually associated with CES. Extension workers in all of their public work should exhibit this commitment.

Historically, CES has been known for its actions based on the needs of people (Reader, 1979). This focus has helped many people find or reclaim their public voice (Barber, 1998). This is still somewhat true today as extension workers live and work side by side with a variety of people in communities. Even so, it is time for extension workers to review and renew their civic commitment. Many of them have forgotten how to utter Wendell Berry’s phrase, “If you need help, I’m going to help you (1986, p. 65).” Extension workers must rediscover how important it is to meet people where they are at (Alinsky, 1989; Coles, 1999). They must all see their role as not simply delivering services but as being a public servant committed to the needs of people, instead of acting on what they assume people want or with what they as professionals are more comfortable.

**What is the Role of the Extension Worker in Civic Renewal?**

As mentioned earlier, an analogy of the Extension worker as orchestrator of civic renewal may be appropriate. The worker is seen as a facilitator of process as well as an
expert skilled in dealing with the task at hand. Soloists are heard and appreciated as well as the whole civic orchestra in the group’s efforts to produce beautiful music.

Civic renewal work may also cast the extension worker as a gardener. The worker prepares the civic soil by becoming familiar with the power relationships at work in a specific garden and enriches the soil with relationship building. When the time is right, the extension worker plants the seeds of civic possibilities in the community and works with others to bring about a productive harvest through public work and support for people’s efforts. The worker also continually cares for the soil and wisely removes weeds or prevents them from growing similar to the facilitation skills required by many extension workers in their civic roles.

These analogies aside, the role of public administrators such as extension workers, is often categorized as agent, expert and steward (Gortner, 1991). As an agent, extension workers are “conveners of public work, providers of tools and resources, including learning to work together (Campbell, 1998 p.2).” As an agent, extension workers may also facilitate horizontal cooperation with partners in business, government and civic associations (CIVICUS, 1999). The extension worker may also work towards civic renewal in an agent capacity that requires organizing (Alinsky, 1989), informing or engaging others in public work.

The extension worker as expert is the traditionally dominant image of CES efforts. The attachment of each worker to a Land Grant University and the U.S. Department of Agriculture results in a strong base of research and information that the worker can bring to their local communities. Liz Rykert says that the challenge is how to best share all the information that is out there (CIVICUS, 1999). The extension worker as expert spends a
majority of their work securing, translating and adapting information for the people they work with.

The extension worker as steward is the most appropriate role for civic renewal. Nel Noddings believes that an extension worker’s efforts as an educator should, “be directed to the maintenance of conditions that will permit caring to flourish (1984, p. 5).” She also stresses that an extension worker’s role in civic renewal is to help build a sense of place for people (Noddings, 1999). The steward role also includes shared leadership (Vroom & Jago, 1988), “providing spaces for voices to be heard (Korten, 1998, p. 34),” revealing the responsibilities around power (Barber, 1998), a commitment “to promoting fair and just process (Laue, 1979, p.3),” and a practice of using power truthfully (Welch, 1998).”

The role of the extension worker and CES is critical for civic renewal in the United States. No other federal agency has the connections in local communities that have been established by CES. One of the original purposes of CES was to help build democracy in this country. It is time once again for CES to put into action, the important role of education in America for civic renewal.

**Moving Towards Increased Capacity for Civic Professionalism in CES**

One historical account of extension workers states, “The new agent coming along needs experience and can get it faster by sitting across the table from an older agent. The question is how much rope to give the new man (sic) and how much to lead him by the hand (Reader, 1979, p.12).” This dilemma is still true today in CES. What amount of training do extension workers need to be competent in community leadership? How do they best learn ethical wisdom and gain civic commitment? Many extension workers have heard the terms civic renewal and civil society and many CES organizations are verbalizing that they are
carrying out public work related to civic renewal. However, Colin Ball and Barry Knight are correct when they say, “the paradigm may have changed in favor of civil society, but the methods have not (CIVICUS, 1999, p.21).” This is reflected throughout CES in that the words are new but in many instances, civic professionalism is not being instilled in extension workers.

There are five important efforts that CES should engage in to help rebuild extension worker’s capacity as civic professionals. The first effort is for all CES organizations (federal, state and local) to examine their vision and mission statements. It is imperative that civic renewal be formalized as an organizational goal in those statements. This would begin to communicate the message that civic renewal is truly important to the organization.

The second capacity building activity is for CES to create a code of ethics for extension workers. The process for developing the code should include members of the community directly and indirectly affected by CES work. This document should clearly show what stakeholders value in extension workers and their work relationships with other people and agencies in doing public work.

Thirdly, CES should examine the characteristics desired in new employees. Do individuals hired for extension work possess the skills or sensibilities to be successful community leaders and to build leadership in communities? Do new extension workers have the ability to gain ethical wisdom and do they project a civic will and commitment? These should be critical aspects of any hiring process for extension workers.

Fourthly, I would suggest that CES create an extension Compact for Civic Renewal based on the model created by Campus Compact (Boyte, 1999b). Even though many CES organizations are part of the university signatories on Campus Compact’s President’s Fourth
of July Declaration, a CES compact would not be a duplication. The nature of extension work would result in a compact more reflective of the extension context. This compact would be an excellent self reflection tool that could help Land Grant Universities grapple with their challenge to be more engaged institutions (Kellogg Commission on The Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, 1999).

Finally, and most importantly, a civic leadership school for extension workers is needed in each state to build the CES capacity for civic professionalism. Extension is well known for community leadership schools created to meet the goal of building leadership capacity in selected citizens (Howell, Weir, & Cook, 1982; Huber, 1997; Walter, 1999). However, these schools are less common for extension workers. I have been able to locate few extension in-depth professional development experiences with a focus on civic professionalism or civic renewal. These professional development efforts should be centered on the competencies of community leadership, ethical wisdom and civic commitment and encompass the following topics (Table 1).

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Conclusion

It is critical that extension workers and CES reclaim their historical practice of civic renewal through civic professionalism. A renewed passion for community leadership, ethical wisdom and civic commitment should fuel this movement. Extension workers should not forget the advice given to them in 1926, “the Extension Representative’s first duty is to identify himself (sic), as a citizen, with the life and interests of the community in which he lives. As a representative of culture he should live a clean and respectable life and associate himself with the religious, educational, and civic interests of the community (Pennsylvania Association of County Agricultural Extension Representatives, 1926, p.3).” My role in this reclamation of civic professionalism is to keep this vision and the documented needs for this action before extension decision-makers and those extension workers with whom I have contact. I also hope to have an active role in creating and implementing the CES action steps suggested in this paper as a means of refocusing CES efforts on building civic professionalism in extension workers. It will be hard work to change existing paradigms of extension work but bold and courageous extension workers and administrators will make it happen.
REFERENCES


