

Experts, Extension, and Democracy: A Prospectus for a New Urban Grant

Abstract

Modern democracy cannot survive without effective citizen participation. The complexity of modern post-industrial life, unfortunately, is an impediment to participation. A new urban grant might be our best hope to enable real citizen participation in modern urban America, but Extension professionals would have to reach deep into our own past to resurrect a participatory ethos and even farther into early American history for models of civic professionalism. A new urban grant would expand well beyond agriculture and embrace the recent calls for an "energy grant," a climate Extension service, and a hazard mitigation Extension service, among others.

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Introduction

America and its universities are in a state of crisis. The country is in a very slow recovery from the Great Recession, but it also seems to be afflicted with a longer-term general malaise associated with a perceived decline in our national quality of life. At the same time, public confidence in our universities appears to be weakening in the face of skyrocketing tuitions and a perception of increasing isolation and irrelevance (Grafton, 2011).

Could the universities, our national brain trust, help revive our cities and help citizens improve their quality of life? One hundred years ago, university Extension successfully engaged the brain trust of the land-grant university system in the service of America's rural, agricultural society. This partnership was in large part responsible for the transformation of American agriculture into the powerhouse that it is today. Why couldn't this same mechanism engage the rest of the brain trust to enable the sustainable development of urban America in the 21st century? Could massive

engagement with urban America, on the same scale as agricultural Extension with rural America 100 years ago, also restore public confidence in the higher education system?

Our universities have the tools America needs to effect a major urban resurgence. What is lacking is the platform with which to engage America. The Extension model of the land- and sea-grant system could be that platform.

The Extension platform worked well 100 years ago, but today we are overwhelmingly urban, and the issues we face seem unimaginably complex, perhaps so complex that we might have to ask ourselves if meaningful engagement of the 100-year-old Extension project with urban America is even possible. In an age of increasing complexity, how could the public be meaningfully engaged? The issues we face today call for increasingly sophisticated experts. Water quality issues, for example, morph into Total Maximum Daily Load projects, informed by models only the modelers can understand. Urban planning becomes mired in complex tax abatement zones and other issues. Even simple questions of food get wrapped up in difficult subjects like genetic engineering. Perhaps these issues are better left to the experts alone.

Experts, Extension, and Democracy

Such was the argument made almost 100 years ago by Walter Lippmann. There could be no such thing as an "omnicompetent" public in the complexity of the modern world. The important decisions would have to be left to a class of detached experts, perhaps mostly in the government and in think tanks. John Dewey, on the other hand, in his famous prolonged debate with Lippmann (see, e.g., Lasch, 1995), believed that participatory democracy could be constituted in such a way that citizens could have equal access to the "means of competence," to use Lasch's phrase, and thus be enabled to make competent and informed decisions. Lippmann has perhaps been proved most correct by the course of history, but the ideal of participatory democracy lives on (Gutman & Thompson, 2004; Harkavy, 2006).

How important is an engaged public? Michael Sandel (1996), one of our leading authorities on modern democracy, sees "civic virtue" and political participation as "*intrinsic* to liberty," that we are "free only insofar as we exercise our capacity to deliberate about the common good, and participate in the public life of a... republic" (p. 26). Deferring to experts on important decisions will not increase our capacity for self-government and neither, therefore, our liberty.

This question of the role of the technical expert versus the public turned up in another, earlier public debate between Henry George, a popular economic philosopher and writer but not a trained economist, running for Mayor of New York City, and E. R. A Seligman, a prominent late 19th century professional economist at Columbia University. Seligman insisted that when it came to complex economic issues, such as the tax issues espoused by George, that "we bow down before the specialist" (Bender, 1993, p. 134). For Seligman, there could be no debate with established scientific opinion.

The rebuttal by Henry George still resonates strongly today: if the issues that "lie about us in our daily lives, and enter into our most important relations, and whose laws lie at the bottom of questions we are called upon to settle with our votes" cannot be debated and understood by the

public, "then democratic government is doomed to failure; and the quicker we surrender ourselves to the government of the rich and the learned, the better" (Bender, 1993, p. 135).

An urban resurgence mediated by universities clearly cannot occur by just a simple transfer of technology and information. Citizens must be in the driver's seat. But they will clearly need the aid of the brain trust. The central issue for universities is how to be both an information broker and an enabler of full citizen participation.

The land-grant university was predicated on the ideal of a broad-based participatory democracy akin to the visions of Dewey and George. At its inception, land-grant Extension was never just about simple technology transfer. The idea was to enable greater citizen participation, not necessarily just more production and more consumption of agricultural products. The university was a research tool to be used by citizens, mediated by the "bridging" professionals of Extension. There was to be a *two-way* flow of information and engagement. Employing this model might be more difficult in our complex modern condition, but it could very well be the only model that could enable citizens to engage the difficult issues of our time.

The engagement ideal persisted in the early years of Extension (Peters, 2002), but by some accounts lost currency by the latter half of the 20th century (Hightower, 1972; McDowell, 1988). Today, the simple knowledge and technology transfer that characterizes much of what occurs in Extension may be much closer to Lippman's vision of a one-way flow of information from scientists to the public than to the participatory democracy ideal of Dewey. In many cases, we are in fact uncomfortably close to Seligman's excessive reverence for the specialist or expert.

If the ideal of university Extension serving to increase a broad-based "means of competence" could not last long in its original rural context, what hope could there be for it in a highly complex 21st century urban context? There may in fact be little hope, but it is clear that university Extension in the land- and sea-grant model might just represent one of the last best hopes for empowering widespread citizen participation and deliberation in a complex environment that increasingly fosters apathy because the complexity appears to be insurmountable to the common citizen.

Academic expertise is not to be bowed down to, but on the other hand it is an indispensable platform for engaging the public. In fact, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that democratic government is doomed *without* academic expertise. The question is how to balance expertise and engagement. This is *the* Extension question of the 21st century, and it will require our best minds to figure out how to execute this balance. Most unfortunately, many of our best minds in academia do not look upon Extension as the stage to do their best work. We have sold Extension short. It will require considerable imagination to reinvent ourselves, but there is perhaps no higher calling for those of us who carry the torch of Extension in the 21st century.

Civic Versus Disciplinary Professionalism

There was a time when there was much less separation between experts and the public. Bender (1993) and others (e.g., Sullivan, 2005; Oleson & Brown, 1976) describe a time when being an expert involved a "profession" or a taking of vows related to community service. In the first half of the 19th century, professions were associated with a "social trusteeship" that involved considerable

public service (Sullivan 2005). The public, not disciplinary peers, was the "only legitimate evaluator of intellectual work" (Bender, 1993, p.10). A profession in those days was very much a "calling."

A "disciplinary professionalism" eventually evolved away from this earlier model of "civic professionalism," in part due to the explosion of knowledge beginning in the latter half of the 19th century and as a result of the industrial revolution and corporate capitalism. Given these changes, it was perhaps inevitable that professionals would be transformed from civic servants to technical experts and that their peers and professional associations would be the judges of their worth, not the communities in which they lived.

Could an Extension professor-in-practice or an agent be envisioned as the reincarnation of the civic professional of the early 19th century? We can't go back to that time, but we should recognize that there was no inevitability to the path that history took, and more important, that there might be aspects of a time that saw a much broader participation in science by the public that might be worth examining and resurrecting.

Reinventing Extension

An "urban grant" that effectively engaged the resources of America's universities in a new urban resurgence would be a massive undertaking. Hundreds if not thousands of new agents, most likely on a metro rather than county scale and hundreds of new professors-in-practice in both public and private universities would be needed to have any kind of significant impact. It is an open question as to whether or not existing programs could effectively ratchet up to meet the challenge. It is the nature of bureaucracies to make incremental changes, not quantum leaps. The creation of the sea grant program in the late 1960s is instructive. Sea grant was modeled directly on the land grant model, because it was clear that the land grant programs were not disposed to make the internal changes necessary to launch such an enterprise, and so a completely separate sea grant program was created. Interestingly, most sea grant programs today are located in land-grant universities and have benefited by that association. However a new urban grant might be conceived, existing land- and sea grant programs should clearly have role to play.

There were explicit calls for an urban grant system in the mid-20th century (e.g., Reisman, 1975), but the call for non-traditional land grant systems has markedly increased in the last few years. There have been appeals, for example, for a hazard-mitigation corps (Godschalk, 2002), an energy grant (Falkowski & Goodman, 2009), and a national climate service (Miles et al., 2006). All of these are explicit calls to "connect ...science to decision-relevant questions" and to "support building capacity to anticipate, plan for, and adapt" (Miles et al., 2006, p. 19616) to changing future conditions in an increasingly complex world, using the land grant model to engage the public. There is apparently a widespread recognition that the land-grant model could be applied well outside the confines of colleges of agriculture.

To reinvent Extension for the 21st century, we must first radically extend our boundaries. The fact that most Extension services are still in a "college of agriculture lockbox" after 100 years does not bode well for change, in spite of some impressive inroads here and there (for example, the Michigan State University Citizen Planner Program). Very few Extension services retain the word agriculture in their title, but relatively few have programs in departments not affiliated with colleges of agriculture.

There must be faculty-ranked specialists or professor-in-practice in departments that span the breadth of the university. We must have Extension faculty in the colleges of engineering, in planning schools, public health schools, etc. The professors-in-practice in these departments new to Extension must have faculty rank equal to their research and teaching colleagues. Extension cannot be a sideshow or an afterthought. The issue of tenure and promotion will be difficult as existing research faculty will have difficulty recognizing the validity of Extension work. The scholarship of application (Boyer, 1990) must be rewarded at the same level as the scholarship of research.

Professors-in-practice must be subject to strict standards just as their research colleagues are, but the preponderance of publications and outreach must be accessible to the general public. Likewise, the preponderance of publications from research professors must be in refereed outlets, but there must also be an analogous requirement for Extension activities. Such a requirement would be a major change in most universities. This is not just a requirement for "service" hours. This is a requirement to be involved directly in the Extension process, in communities that benefit from university engagement.

Second, we must restore the engagement model developed by the founders of university Extension. Engagement in the original model was much more than simple dissemination or even "authoritative advisement" (Fischer, 2004). The idea was that the university brain trust would be a tool at the service of the public. The most profound Extension activity is to facilitate public deliberation. We don't really have a complete conception yet of just what that means. But we can only find out by seriously engaging the public. We are able to glimpse some good outlines of what deliberative engagement might look like, for example, through the work of many professionals within the National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals. But we have so much farther to go.

Advocates or Prophets?

Finally, we must rethink the issue of advocacy if we are to seriously engage the public. Neutrality and a lack of advocacy are often touted as a hallmark of university Extension work. By virtue of their function as stewards of knowledge and of the scientific method, public universities have an inherent role to play in informing public debate, a moral mission even, in the words of Ernest Boyer (1990), to not only serve society but to *reshape* it. It is perhaps a role somewhat similar to that of Old Testament prophets—plainly pointing out the implications of different paths and alternative futures. There was no neutrality in their position. The institution of tenure was developed with the very idea of advocacy in mind—a protection for professors to profess or advocate for specific practices or positions without fear of retribution, positions of course based on a scientific approach (DeFleur, 2007). Tenure was never about protecting incompetence—it was and should be about protecting the role of speaking truth to power, or to anyone else for that matter. There was no neutrality in how Seaman Knapp, the "first" Extension agent, carried out his mission. His was not a "take it or leave it" approach to the knowledge and expertise he brought to rural Texas. He saw that agriculture needed to change and he worked unabashedly to change it.

We betray the role of the university in society when we shy away from advocacy, thus defined. We must take positions, precisely because we are holders of the light. We are or should be advocates

for clean air and water, advocates for vibrant communities and sustainable economies, etc. What we cannot afford to be is a partisan for particular political approaches to issues, although we can and should certainly weigh in on policy issues and their differential effectiveness.

On the other hand, a danger with this active approach is that the university comes to believe that it has all the answers. This is why the scholarship of engagement cannot succeed without a robust bridging mechanism, such as is found in the faculty-ranked Extension specialist, as is found in the university researcher with a mandate to engage the public through her Extension colleagues, and as is found in community agents working locally but connected to the university. Connection to community roots is what keeps academia humble. Increasing specialization is inevitable. The Extension "bridge" can ensure that that specialization remains responsive to public needs.

Conclusion

In the end, Extension can't just be about satisfying the public's demands. We can't be just about gauging the public's preferences and tailoring programs to meet those preferences. Sandel (1996) reminds us that a republic seeks to "cultivate in citizens the qualities of character necessary to the common good of self government" (p. 25). That is exactly the mandate of land grant Extension. That is a clear and established vision that we must uphold. Our job now is to re-imagine how we can accomplish that mandate in the complex urban world of the 21st century. We clearly have the tools. Do we have the imagination?

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