



Rising to Meet Public Sustainability Demand

Extension Sustainability Outreach

By Roslynn Brain

Introduction

What is sustainability? Who cares about the issues? Have we been walking the talk? What are we currently doing to meet rising demand? This article draws from major sustainability publications, programs, and from a recent Extension Sustainability Summit held in Park City, Utah, in order to answer these questions.

What is Sustainability?

Working as a statewide sustainable communities Extension specialist, I am often asked this question. My short response is: “sustainability is living with an environmental ethic.” Why does the environment serve as my basis in working within sustainability? Because without healthy air, open space, clean water, nutritious food, and clean energy, money and social issues would not matter as we could not survive. The environment serves as the foundation of my sustainability work. Profitability and social prosperity are effective outreach methods and communication tools to use in order to enhance the natural environment and sustain movements working to do so. Thinking about what we need to survive as a species has resulted in the five thematic areas of my statewide sustainability outreach program in Utah: land – conservation and landfill issues; air – quality and climate change; food – sustainable and local food systems; water – conservation and quality; and energy – renewable.

Sustainability Demand

Sustainability is a concept that has spread in popularity over the past decade. As an example, in a study of approximately 4,000 business managers and executives from 113 countries, more than 70 percent or 2,500 companies globally added sustainability to their management agendas in the past six years (MIT Sloan, 2012). Also, in a nationwide survey with 12,000 college applicants by the Princeton Review (2012), 65 percent of respondents stated they would value information about a college’s commitment to the environment. Of that number, 24 percent or close to 2,000 respondents said such information would “very much” impact their decision to attend a school.

Have we as Extension educators, connecting university teaching and research to the people, risen fast enough to meet this rapidly growing demand? In 2008, Cathy Elliot and colleagues published an article in the *Journal of Extension* entitled “Sustainable living education: A call to Extension.” In the article, the authors state, “to effectively address the need for Sustainable Living Education, Extension must immediately re-focus and re-tool. We need a state-by-state implementation of sustainable living programming to help clientele break from excessive consumption patterns held up as societal norms...if Extension is not prepared

to be a leader in providing education on this overriding challenge of our time, the public will go elsewhere for it—and indeed, the public is already doing so.” Why has the public looked elsewhere for sustainability information, and how is (and must) Extension change to address this problem?

Walking the Talk

Although Extension as a whole has been slow to embrace sustainability outreach, recent years have shown a rapid expansion of environmentally focused Extension programs. In 2010, the National Network for Sustainable Living Education (NNSLE) conducted an online survey of Extension personnel across the USA regarding their habits at work and home relating to environmental conservation and sustainability, which received 633 responses. This survey found that Extension educators were not modeling many environmental behaviors, ranging from paying bills electronically to composting. This internal survey provided insight to the education needed among Extension faculty and staff regarding sustainability, so we can model these behaviors to our clientele as a leader in the field. However, several Extension educators have been practicing a myriad of sustainability behaviors, and providing outreach in this area, which was discovered at the 2013 Extension Sustainability Summit.

Extension’s Move Toward Sustainability

In October of 2013, Utah State Extension Sustainability partnered with the Western Rural Development Center to launch the nation’s first Extension Sustainability Summit. This summit brought together over 50 professionals to share Extension programs and research in environmental sustainability, with 18 oral presentations and 14 exhibits. Presentations at the summit were 15 minutes in length. This shorter time allowed for lightning sessions (similar to a world café approach) in which participants envisioned the successes and future of Extension concerning major sustainability themes. I highlight some of those findings here, and the chair of each summit session will discuss these issues in further depth via the other articles in this issue.

SUSTAINABILITY

The term sustainability was envisioned to encompass long-term, environmental responsibility, social benefit, and economical viability. Given that sustainability concepts encompass all Extension program areas, participants at the Extension Sustainability Summit agreed that university Extension programs must commit to the concept of sustainability as a whole for the long-term.

LAND

Although land conservation efforts must still be targeted toward traditional agriculture, assisting small ranchette and urban farms will become increasingly important for Extension. Extension educators could also benefit from training local officials and communities in fundamental principles of land-use planning and zoning, thus creating opportunities to infuse sustainable development concepts into policy and community-wide initiatives. Extension educators are well positioned to bring outside expertise, including experts in conservation easements, estate planning, and range management who can help with the goal of maintaining and enhancing rural landscapes. With landfill issues, Extension educators can work with city environmental departments, local landfills, and recycling centers to provide educational workshops and outreach to shift attitudes and behavior.

AIR AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Although climate change is still a hot topic, many universities have explicit climate change

Outcomes and Impacts of the 2013 Summit



Information about the Extension Sustainability Summit is available on the Western Rural Development Center’s website. <http://wrdc.usu.edu/htm/programs/ess>

The outcomes and impacts report of the Summit is available to view and download. http://wrdc.usu.edu/files/publications/publication/pub_5893621.pdf

programs, from Florida to Minnesota to Alaska. In order to address climate change, Extension will need to communicate effectively about managing resources in the likelihood of increasingly variable climate conditions. Extension's role would be most effective in framing discussions about climate variability, improving system resiliency, and managing risk. Support from government officials and university administration will be a great assistance to Extension when it comes to confidently providing information and outreach to clientele. Summit participants agreed, however, that branding sustainability programs under the terms "climate change" or "global warming" would not be of benefit. Instead, Extension educators should be conversant about climate change issues, but not market their existing programs under climate change.

Regarding air quality, in Utah, California, and many other states, air pollution is becoming a growing concern. Although Summit participants agreed this was an important topic, no programs could be identified in Extension directly addressing this issue.

FOOD

To educate the public and youth about sustainable food systems, we need to document with producers the story behind food production via videos, national geographic-style photos, and intriguing stories. Partnerships will be critical, involving moving past compartmentalization. Having kids grow their own food is a large component of this type of education. Urban agriculture can act as a catalyst for urban economic development and support of small-scale agriculture. Also, from an Extension or land grant perspective, accessing urban agriculture gives us another way to communicate with a new constituent. We also need to focus on food-waste diversion from landfills and into compost, recycling, etc. Offering programs connecting rural and urban audiences, such as breakfasts on the farm, fundraising dinners, socials connecting farmers and chefs, etc., will help bridge the gap. Bridging will also require addressing food justice issues.

WATER

Extension needs to better use university resources and develop capacity in the area of urban/suburban water quality, conservation, and stormwater management issues. More of the outreach concerning water issues needs to be urban and suburban focused, including nurseries, landscape businesses, developers, realtors, Master Gardeners, etc. There is also a large need for Extension outreach in water sustainability issues in rural communities with less town and county outreach capacity.

ENERGY

The local nature of Extension is perceived as an asset not possessed by other state and national organizations. The rapport of Extension in local communities enables the presentation of new information, such as energy, from a position of trust. This allows Extension to be more effective than other, outside, entities. Energy issues also seamlessly integrate into other Extension discussions, such as soil health or community development. Energy education can engage a great variety of Extension's existing clientele. Personal energy literacy is an overarching goal, where Extension clientele can make informed decisions about how they use energy. It is not just "coal is bad" or "renewables are expensive," but a more informed discussion about the costs and benefits of our individual and collective choices.

Future Extension Sustainability Summits

Sustainability-focused programs within Extension continue to grow. On the next page is a sample of new programs stemming from Extension to meet demand. Also, given many requests, Utah State University Extension Sustainability and the Western Rural Development Center will host another Extension Sustainability Summit in 2015. This Summit will again be western focused, while allowing relevant speakers and participants to attend from outside of the western region.



Examples of Western Extension Sustainability-Focused Programs

University of Arizona's Externships in Community Sustainability Through Cooperative Extension

This program creates opportunities for University of Arizona students to bring their experience, skills, and enthusiasm to their communities through innovative sustainability projects, such as rainwater harvesting projects, school and community gardens, and farmers markets.

studentaffairs.arizona.edu/greenfund

Oregon State University Sustainable Living

Sustainability means meeting the economic, social, and environmental needs of the present without compromising the similar needs of future generations.

extension.oregonstate.edu/metro/sustainable-living

Utah State University Extension Sustainability

Providing credible information and trainings fostering increased awareness and behavioral change to improve environmental, social, and economic conditions.

extension.usu.edu/sustainability

University of Arizona's Land Use Planning and Sustainable Development Program

Arizona Cooperative Extension's Land Use Planning and Sustainable Development program helps citizens define and contribute to the future of their communities by becoming better informed about exurbanization, renewable energy, economic development, land use planning, sustainability and local government structure.

rurallandscapes.extension.arizona.edu

Agricultural Sustainability Institute at UC Davis

The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program provides leadership and support for scientific research and education in agricultural and food systems. The statewide program assists farmers and ranchers in developing and implementing sustainable production and marketing systems and supports the state's rural and urban communities in understanding the concept and value of sustainable agriculture.

sarep.ucdavis.edu

Colorado State University Extension Farm to Table Program

This program has resources/information for producers, retailers, and consumers. At each stage of the food chain, from the producer to the consumer, food safety strategies can be followed to minimize contamination and help lower the risk of food-borne illness.

farmtotable.colostate.edu/index.php

Utah State University Extension: Utah Farm-Chef-Fork.

This program is a collaboration between Utah State University Extension Sustainability, the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food, and Slow Food Utah. The goal is to enhance community vitality and reduce food miles by connecting Utah producers and restaurants through trainings and meet-and-greet opportunities.

extension.usu.edu/sustainability/htm/programs/utah-farm-chef-fork

University of Nevada Extension Natural Resources Program

Cooperative Extension water specialists collaborate with agencies, policy makers, industry, and homeowners to save water, protect its quality, and find new water sources. They work to help people find that delicate balance that will keep our ecosystems healthy and sustainable. Programs include: Waterwise Habits, Environmental Stewardship, Nevada Naturalist and more.

unce.unr.edu/programs/natural

New Mexico State University Cooperative Extension Service Water Task Force

The NMSU Water Task Force promotes and supports the role of science and technology in addressing critical water issues facing New Mexico through research, education, and Extension outreach. The New Mexico Integrated Water Management Handbook provides guidance on how to evaluate and understand site-specific field conditions.

extension.nmsu.edu/energy_water.html

aces.nmsu.edu/ces/watertaskforce/index.html

Utah State University Water Quality

This site provides a wealth of information and programs that help the public protect the quality of Utah's streams and rivers, lakes and reservoirs, and groundwater.

extension.usu.edu/waterquality

Colorado Energy Master

Each of the three courses of this program consists of three classes (two weekday evening short classes that can be taken from one's home computer and one Saturday half-day class that starts at a County Extension office and ends with a field trip). Individual classes required for aspiring Colorado Energy Masters are also offered.

<http://www.ext.colostate.edu/energymaster/>

Montana State University's Exploring Energy Efficiency & Alternatives for the Home, Farm & Ranch (E3A)

E3A is a source for non-biased, research-based information on small renewable energy technologies. E3A provides free downloadable fact sheets, links to resources, and resources to help you explore small renewable energy systems. For Educators, E3A is a self-guided, self-contained toolkit of resources to help you teach energy. In addition to fact sheets, presentation material, and other resources you'll find online, the E3A toolkit includes lesson plans and resources to help make teaching energy easy.

e3a4u.info

University of Wyoming Extension Renewable & Efficient Energy

The "Renewable and Efficient Energy – Solutions for Wyoming" is designed to provide UW-developed resources, such as publications and assessment tools, and a gateway to the many excellent resources of other partners, such as the United States Department of Energy and National Renewable Energy Lab.

wyomingrenewables.org

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EXTENSION SUSTAINABILITY OUTREACH: RISING TO MEET PUBLIC SUSTAINABILITY DEMAND

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