

## **Cornell Cooperative Extension: A History of Commitment to the People of New York State.**

Cornell Cooperative Extension's public mission is perhaps the most public manifestation of the status of Cornell University as New York State's "land grant" institution. The Land Grant Act, signed into law on July 2, 1862, by President Abraham Lincoln, provided grants of federal lands to states and territories to establish "...at least one college where the leading object shall be ... to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, ... in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life."

The land grant philosophy, as it evolved in the late nineteenth century, led to a "democratization" of higher education. Control of higher education began to shift into the hands of the common people, as opposed to the wealthy or religious leaders. Simultaneously, the curriculum was expanded to include fields of study related to the "several pursuits and professions of life" and public problems began to receive attention through applied research and the public service work of higher education institutions.

Extension work, begun in the late 1800s, was an early part of the land grant commitment by Cornell University. The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 recognized the value of this early work in New York and other states, as it established the formal relationship among federal, state and local governments to support extension work that continues today. Cornell University provides overall leadership as New York's land grant institution and, by statute, as agent for the state in this three-way partnership. Several themes of Cooperative Extension have remained consistent, including a commitment to programs that not only enhance economic growth but foster democracy and human dignity. The current mission of Cornell Cooperative Extension is "to enable people to improve their lives and communities through partnerships that put experience and research knowledge to work." In other words, Cooperative Extension works with people, rather than for them, to enhance their knowledge, wisdom, skills, and capacities. It does this through a network of Extension Associations in counties across the state.

Since people support decisions they help to make, Cornell Cooperative Extension believes in shared leadership through locally elected Boards of Directors and active program development committees. Cornell Cooperative Extension focuses on trends and redefines programs and processes to meet rapidly changing priorities. Applying research results to society's issues has been a cornerstone of the process. Programs have evolved over the years and reflect changes in values, ethics, community norms, family structures, mobility and the economy. In 1968, the USDA and the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges released *A People and a Spirit*. This report challenged the system to make a commitment to "all" people and recognized that the universities' expertise cited in the Smith-Lever Act goes beyond agriculture.

In 1954, a special Congressional appropriation helped Cooperative Extension undertake a *Farm and Home Development* program. The farm and home were viewed as a system, and the program was designed to look at the operation both as a business and a lifestyle. Production options, marketing, community, lifestyle, and plans for the farm children's development were all part of the educational experience. During the 1960s, the agricultural community and land grant faculty saw a need for greater specialized

agricultural training. In response, Cooperative Extension introduced regional specialists who were recruited for their educational specialty and assigned a geographic area. In the early 1980s, the farm economy was in a state of crisis. Farms cut costs, shifted production choices, explored new markets, and updated financial goals. Programs such as *Farm Net* were designed to work with farm families making life-changing decisions, and *PRO-DAIRY* was created to respond to the needs of the dairy industry.

Community development has a varied history within Cooperative Extension as funding has ebbed and flowed. In 1962, a national rural renewal program evolved to foster a sound rural economy. The Rural Development Act of 1972 expanded funding for Cooperative Extension to play a key role in education. Community development helps people and communities identify problems, weigh options, and obtain resources to solve them. Through the years, Cornell Cooperative Extension has collaborated with county governments and provided workshops to support them in their creative and meaningful work.

Family programs have been designed to improve the human condition. *Saving Steps*, the first publication prepared by Martha Van Rensselaer in the early 1900s helped farmwomen reduce their workload. Research conducted at Cornell and other land grant universities served as a basis for *Saving Steps*, and Home Demonstration Clubs used that research to teach women across the state ways to improve their home and family lives. During the 1970s a tenant education program was developed in collaboration with UPACA, a community group in East Harlem in New York City. Education from modules that focused on consumer education taught participants problem-solving skills. In 1968, Congress appropriated funds for what became the *Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP)* to address hunger in America. The program is based on the latest research and education methods and hires paraprofessionals from the target audience. The education is provided in a one-on-one setting and focuses on measurable behavior.

The 4-H youth development program began with a club model and youth enrolled in projects or activities. Parents and other adults who care about youth serve as volunteer leaders and build environments that promote hands-on learning. Through the years, alternatives to reach young people have expanded. In 1948, the International Farm Youth Exchange program began and New York has sent young men and women to countries around the world and received guests from most continents. School enrichment programs were added to involve more young people in “hands-on” learning. One of the most popular activities done in cooperation with the school system has been embryology. The advent of television added more opportunities. *Mulligan Stew*, a series of six half-hour productions by Michigan State University reached youth across the USA. Today, youth interact via computer clubs and engage with co-learners from the corners of the globe. In 1986, 4-H identified Building Blocks important in youth work. They include: 1) keep the focus on youth development; 2) give 4-H leaders opportunities to expand their educational leadership skills and management responsibilities; and 3) strengthen public-private partnerships. These are still pertinent today. In 2000, 415,000 youth ages 5-19 (1 of 8 New Yorkers in that age group) participated in Cornell Cooperative Extension’s 4-H youth development. More than 60 percent of the participants live in communities with populations over 10,000.

Throughout the United States, land grant institutions are making a renewed commitment to public engagement. As part of this commitment, Cornell Cooperative Extension recognizes that it must keep up with the profound changes in society. For more than a year, Cornell Cooperative Extension has been engaged in a strategic planning process to do just that. We call the plan that is the result of that process “Committed to Excellence”. As the title suggests, it is designed to build excellence and to make us more accessible, responsive, and accountable to New Yorkers.

The plan focuses on six key areas including:

**Enhanced Program Development:** To assure that we are most effectively meeting the needs of the diverse population of New York state, we are strengthening the link between research and extension. To accomplish this, we are revamping the program development process to emphasize involvement of campus faculty and staff, county association staff, and public stakeholders.

**Program Excellence:** The plan also calls for consistent standards of excellence across the system in program development, delivery and evaluation. The application of new standards is expected to lead to more dynamic programming and to greater program impact. To enhance program excellence, we created the NYS Council of Cornell Cooperative Extension Associations. The council will bring volunteers together to provide leadership on issues important to the well-being of the county associations, to continually improve the partnership between Cornell University and the associations, and to make the CCE system more effective.

**Professional Excellence:** New educational standards have been put in place for Extension educators. These standards were established to help assure that those who provide leadership for the programs conducted by Cornell Cooperative Extension have the skills and tools necessary to excel. We instituted a system-wide performance management process to support continual performance improvement. Finally, we are committed to improving pay levels to make our organization competitive with systems in other states.

**Regionalism:** A stronger regional emphasis is necessary if we are to meet our goal of system-wide excellence. We intend to focus on the development of multi-county, multi-state and multi-institution collaborations to complement and enhance programming of county associations. To more effectively deliver programs, we will create learning centers and strengthen our relationships with State University of New York and other institutions.

**Connectivity:** We are installing a system-wide integrated technology infrastructure to deliver programs at a distance in ways we could only dream of in the past. Once the network and supporting technology are in place, we will be able to connect with learners live via interactive video from anywhere within our system. This will not only support the use of interactive programs and staff development, but also allow face-to-face consultations between constituents and Extension educators – on and off campus, or with other institutions. Streaming of video that has been a slow process in many locations will eventually become near broadcast quality.

**Business Management Systems:** Finally, we will use technology and continuous improvement processes to modify our business management systems. The goal is to maximize the return on the investment made by the people of New York in CCE.

The plan sets out significant and exciting challenges and opportunities. Successful implementation will require a lot of hard work and a firm commitment to change from everyone in the system. The bottom line is: the goal of “Committed to Excellence” is to have New Yorkers recognize Cornell Cooperative Extension for its:

- high-quality, innovative educational programs and products that help New Yorkers build strong, healthy, and vital communities;
- programs that manifest seamless linkages between research, teaching, and extension;
- collaborative program and product development processes that provide extensive learning opportunities for New Yorkers;
- faculty and staff who are rewarded for experimentation, innovation, and learning;
- educational programs that make full use of up-to-date communication strategies and technologies; and
- efficient, effective business management systems.

A copy of the executive summary of “Committed to Excellence” is available on the web at <http://www.cce.cornell.edu/> or by contacting one of the Cornell Cooperative Extension offices located throughout New York.

Adapted from:

History of Cornell Cooperative Extension” by Scott Peters, Cornell University.)

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