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It's Not Just Providing Information

Perspectives on the Purposes and Significance of Extension Work

By **Scott Peters**

Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) is a community education system with an annual budget of more than \$125 million, two-thirds of which comes from county, state, and federal government appropriations. It employs over 500 extension educators in 57 county-based associations, plus New York City. These educators work with hundreds of Cornell University faculty and staff and thousands of community members to pursue CCE's official mission: to enable "people to improve their lives and communities through partnerships that put experience and knowledge to work."¹

Over the past five years, more than fifty CCE educators were invited to tell stories about their lives and work in individual interviews, most of which were conducted by Cornell graduate students. Recorded, transcribed, and edited into "profiles," these stories provide considerable insight into educators' views about their work and experiences. *We Grow People*, a collection of ten profiles of educators from New York City, was published in 2003. *Catalyzing Change* is a new collection of eight profiles of educators from Greene, Tompkins, and Erie counties in upstate New York.²

¹ Statistics and quote from CCE's web site, <http://www.cce.cornell.edu/>

² For details about how the profiles in this book were developed, go to <http://instruct1.cit.cornell.edu/courses/practicestories/>. Both *Catalyzing Change* and *We Grow People* are available to download as PDF documents at http://instruct1.cit.cornell.edu/Courses/practicestories/COLL_Educators.htm.

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In this brief introductory essay, I look to the profiles in this new collection for insights into Extension's purposes and significance, both as a particular form of community education, and as an organization. Specifically, I raise and answer two closely related questions:

- How do the Extension educators in this collection understand and articulate the purposes of their work?
- In light of these purposes, how should we understand the significance of Extension educators' work in contemporary society?

Background

CCE is part of the national Cooperative Extension System that was established in 1914 when President Woodrow Wilson signed the Smith-Lever Act into law. This system involves a partnership between a federal agency (the United States Department of Agriculture), land-grant universities, state and local governments, and the general citizenry. In the language of the Smith-Lever Act, Extension's original work 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."³

Today, Extension work is often described in organizational rhetoric as the dissemination, interpretation, and/or application of university research and expertise to address individual, family, business, and community needs and problems. While agriculture remains a key focus, Extension also works in urban, suburban, and rural areas on issues related to nutrition and health, family and consumer science, the environment, horticulture, natural resource and wildlife management, youth development, leadership development, and community and economic development.

As we approach the national Extension system's centennial, neither its continuing relevance nor its survival can be taken for granted. Survival hinges on public funding, and public funding hinges on perceptions of public relevance: that is, on the degree to which Extension is perceived to be of value in pursuing public interests and ends. With respect to this matter, the Extension system has a problem:

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³ Smith-Lever Act quoted from Wayne D. Rasmussen, *Taking the University to the People: Seventy-Five Years of Cooperative Extension* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1989), p. 254.

it suffers from a narrow and relatively uninteresting image. Despite its broad reach and work, Extension is often portrayed and perceived as nothing more than a neutral, one-way mechanism or conduit for diffusing research-based information in response to people's questions about farming, gardening, and nutrition. If it were really true that this is all Extension is about, it would be hard to imagine—in the age of the internet and tight public budgets—how its relevance and its continued

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existence at taxpayers' expense could be justified. But this is not all Extension is about.

CCE's official mission of enabling "people to improve their lives and communities through partnerships that put experience and knowledge to work" suggests that there is something far broader, more interesting, and more publicly relevant about Extension's mission and work than answering

people's questions from a stance of neutrality. It suggests that Extension is about human and community development. In other words, it suggests that Extension is about *change*, and it positions CCE and its educators and collaborators as *agents or catalysts of change*. In doing so, it raises difficult questions of purpose and significance.

For what purposes and in what ways do CCE educators seek to enable people to improve (i.e., change) their lives and communities? What constitutes improvement? Who decides that improvements ought to be made in individuals and communities, what these improvements should be, and how they should be made? What values and ideals ground and guide extension educators' roles and work as agents of change? How are we to understand the public relevance, meaning, and significance of extension educators' change-agent work, particularly in relation to the question of whether or not Extension should be supported by public tax dollars?

The profiles in this book provide us with tentative answers to these (and many other) questions. However, it is important to emphasize that they do not provide us with answers that can be generalized across or beyond the CCE system. These profiles do not constitute a random, representative sample. Rather, they constitute a purposeful sample that was deliberately selected to illuminate provocative rather than representative views and work. The profiles in this book are provocative because they challenge prevailing views and presumptions about what Extension is and how and why it matters. They help us to see and understand Extension as a

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non-neutral force for change, where Extension education is not only or mainly about providing information and answering questions, but *catalyzing change*.

There is nothing new or unique about viewing Extension as a catalyst or agent of change. As I have learned from veteran educators, CCE has used a change agent language to describe Extension's mission and work for at least three decades. Such a language has also been used in many papers published in the *Journal of Extension*, the peer-reviewed journal for the Extension profession.⁴ But the important issue is not whether or for how long Extension educators have viewed themselves and their organization as catalysts or agents of change. Rather, it is what such a view *means*, and what its implications are with respect to how we might answer difficult questions of purpose and significance.

Purposes

Monika Roth, the Agriculture and Environment Program Leader for CCE-Tompkins County, tells us in her profile that "Extension is a grassroots effort."

It's more than just that process of, "I have the information you need. I am the teacher and you are the student." It's much more engaged. It is an engaged process. We involve people to make change.

Monika's view that Extension is more than a one-way process of providing information, that it is an "engaged process" that involves people in making change, can be found in every profile in this book. While this view is intriguing, it doesn't reveal anything about the *kinds* of change Extension involves people to make. In other words, it doesn't reveal what Extension's *purposes* are. Surely Extension's purpose isn't making change for change's sake. It must be about making change in order to pursue particular values, ideals, interests, and ends. But which ones?

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During a collective reflection session I helped to facilitate with the four educators from CCE-Greene County whose profiles are included in this book, I raised

⁴ See, for example, R.S. Morse, P.W. Brown, and J.E. Warning. (2006). "Catalytic Leadership: Reconsidering the Nature of Extension's Leadership Role." *Journal of Extension*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (April, 2006). Published on-line at <http://www.joe.org/joe/2006april/a9.shtml>.

the question of what Extension's purpose is. In response, Andy Turner, Executive Director of CCE-Greene County, said the following:

We really need to take a look at what we say Extension's actual purpose is, because to me, it's very bland now. All it talks about is the process of, "We take research and we get it out to communities, and we value what communities say." It doesn't speak to what the outcomes are supposed to be. That doesn't work for me personally at all.

Actually, CCE's official mission statement *does* speak to what the outcomes are supposed to be: namely, enabling people to "improve their lives and communi-

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ties." But like a language of change, a language of improvement is vague. As Andy correctly notes, it doesn't commit Extension to any *specific* outcomes. This is apparently a problem for him. Why?

As we learn from reading his profile, Andy is deeply critical of contemporary society. "I think that we need to fundamentally change the way our society works, and how we interact with the natural world around us," he tells us.

I think that the model that we currently function under has become so focused on economic development, over and above everything else, that it doesn't include any accounting for impacts on water and air and health and communities. It is not sustainable. It is not an accurate depiction of the health of communities, landscapes, or human beings.

Andy's critique of contemporary society isn't just his personal opinion as a citizen. It's his public judgment as an Extension professional. It directly informs and shapes the public work he pursues as Executive Director of CCE-Greene County. In his words:

My passion right now is to apply through our Extension mission a way to change how we live, to look at our economic system in a different way, to bring in values that we don't seem to account for, such as the health of the landscape, the quality of life in communities, the level of participation in community events and the health of our democracy. That is what I am really into. Extension allows you to pursue that.

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By saying that “Extension allows you to pursue that,” Andy underplays his role as an organizational leader and change agent. The story we read in his profile is not about how he was simply allowed to pursue a social change agenda through CCE-Greene County’s mission. Rather, it’s about how he has worked hard to change the organization’s mission and culture so that he and others could pursue a social change agenda.

When he began his work as Executive Director in 1998, Andy found that CCE-Greene County had lost its vision. “There was not a big picture,” he recalls. “It was just a collection of people who do programs. Nobody really knew what it all added up to.” The problem, he feels, had to do with how the organization had come to view its mission:

Somehow the mission had become certain programs over the years. I felt like it was restricting what we did. It was self-replicating and wasn’t going to take us where I wanted us to go. Instead, the mission should be the changes in the community that we are about, bringing together the right kind of mix of information and people to create better communities. That is the mission. The programs are the mechanism; they are not the mission. I came in with that theory. One of the reasons that I took the position was so I could act on it.

Here’s how Andy describes CCE-Greene County’s current mission in his profile:

Our mission is a community development mission, and we bring to that something different than any other organization in Greene County. The Extension model is to create educational programs that address community needs. It mixes local concerns and local values with the values and expertise that come through the land-grant college. I see it as an equal kind of mixing. As a result, you have a more balanced program that has an opportunity to lead to real impacts and changes in the community. For me, the ultimate goal is that our programs should, at some level, be directed at changes in the community. Over time, we should see how a community, not just individuals, is actually different as a result of Extension programs. *It’s not just providing information.*

As Andy sees it, Extension’s mission isn’t its programs. It’s not just about changing individuals, and it’s not just about providing information. It’s about changing communities. It’s about “bringing together the right kind of mix of information and people to create better communities.” But it’s not just a mix of information and people; it’s a mix that includes *values* as well. Without the crucial ingredient of values, a mission aimed at changing communities by making them “better” is liter-

ally meaningless. To know what “better” means, we need to know what the specific changes are that Extension educators aim to involve people to make. And we need to know what the specific values are that ground and guide the work educators do to pursue these changes.

If we go back to his strong critique of contemporary society, we see that Andy believes that “we need to fundamentally change the way our society works, and how we interact with the natural world around us.” Grounded in this conviction,

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for him Extension’s mission is to “change how we live, to look at our economic system in a different way, to bring in values that we don’t seem to account for, such as the health of the landscape, the quality of life in communities, the level of participation in community events and the health of our democracy.” Unlike CCE’s vague official mission of enabling people to

“improve their lives and communities through partnerships that put experience and knowledge to work,” this view of Extension’s mission *does* speak to what the outcomes—and therefore, the purposes—are supposed to be.

When we read the profiles in this book, we find Andy and the other educators speaking of more than Extension’s programs, activities, and services, such as 4-H, Master Gardeners, nutrition and parenting classes, and the facilitation of community visioning processes. We find them speaking of more than answering questions and providing information, expertise, and technical assistance to meet people’s needs and help them solve problems and make informed decisions. We also—and more importantly—find them speaking of their purposes and work as change agents. Specifically, we find them speaking of how and why they seek to *facilitate sustainable development, increase people’s respect and reverence for life, and build local democracy.*

Facilitating Sustainable Development

Rick Burstell grew up on Long Island and worked for many years as a diesel mechanic before taking an Extension educator job with CCE-Greene County. In his profile, Rick describes Greene County, which is in the Catskill Mountains/Hudson Valley region of upstate New York, as a “beautiful place” with a “terrible economy.” Observing that the county is in the midst of a transition, he worries about where things are headed. “Real estate has gone crazy,” he says. “There has been a rise in

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building development. Wal-Mart wants to move in, and Home Depot is moving in. All of this will have, in my view, a negative effect on the community.” So what does he think should be done?

If we develop our area to build the economy, let's make sure that we maintain the integrity of the environment at the same time, so that it doesn't become like where I came from, where it is so polluted. Out on Long Island, there are a lot of educational programs about pesticide uses. They polluted everything down there. There are a million and a half people who live on the eastern tip of Long Island who have been throwing things in their yard and their cess-pools for the last seventy-five years. Then they wonder why all the ground water is polluted. In Greene County, it is a critical time now for people to understand that the things we do in the next couple of years will have a major impact on this place. If we are going to maintain it as one of the special places, we are going to have to take some steps to do that.

This is not the voice of a neutral question answerer. It's the voice of a change agent. Rick consciously pursues his change-agent work as an Extension educator—work that includes answering people's questions about gardening and developing educational programs for youth—in ways that are designed to inspire people to take steps in their lives and communities that will contribute to the public work of facilitating sustainable development. That is one of his central purposes. It is also one of Andy's central purposes. In his profile, Andy speaks of how he and others have been positioning CCE-Greene County to not only contribute to, but also influence the nature and direction of economic development in Greene County. “The things we have been working on lately are focused on economic development,” he tells us.

But we are also trying to be upfront and say, “Look, you need to consider the resources and the landscape. These are all parts of economic development. It's not just creating jobs.” We are not trying to say that we are just an economic development organization. We want to show our piece of this in relation to what the economic development office is doing and what the planning office is doing. We are trying to say, “The landscape and protecting agriculture and how that connects to the tax base and how that leads to tourism dollars are also important.” We are trying to show how, if you have eighty-five percent forested land, you could teach landowners ways to grow ginseng or mushrooms or log it in a way that is sustainable and that doesn't impact on health or water quality. There is nobody else doing that kind of thing in our local community.

Given that Greene County is eighty-five percent forested land, one of the most important things CCE-Greene County has done in recent years to facilitate sustainable development is to establish the Agroforestry Resource Center (ARC). ARC's goal is "to promote sustainable practices that will provide economic benefits to landowners and communities while preserving forested areas so they continue to provide ecological, economic and public health benefits to the surrounding human population."⁵ In his profile, Bob Beyfuss, Agriculture and Natural Resources Issue Leader for CCE-Greene County, tells us the story of how ARC was envisioned and organized. Marilyn Wyman, an Agriculture and Natural Resources Educator with

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CCE-Greene County, played a key role in the story. In her profile, she tells us: "You have to be able to bring ecological principles to people's everyday work, their businesses, how they live their lives, and how they make the choices that they make." This is the work of facilitating sustainable development. Note that Marilyn is speaking of bringing *principles*, not information, to people's everyday work and lives. While the work of facilitat-

ing sustainable development through ARC and other initiatives and programs is partly a matter of providing and/or developing research-based information, it is also a matter of bringing ecological principles and values into the mix to influence and guide people's views and behaviors.

In the other profiles in this collection, educators from Tompkins and Erie Counties speak of facilitating sustainable development in similar ways. Ken Schlather, Executive Director of CCE-Tompkins County, which is in the Finger Lakes region of central New York, tells us about Extension's role in organizing an energy efficiency initiative. Monika Roth discusses her work of organizing the Finger Lakes Culinary Bounty (FLCB) and other projects that are designed to facilitate sustainable development. Nancy Potter, Assistant Director and Issue Leader for Family and Community Well-Being for CCE-Tompkins County, tells us of her work organizing community visioning projects that are meant to influence the nature and direction of development in small towns in sustainable ways. And Sally Cunningham, former Community Horticulture Leader for CCE-Erie County, which

⁵ Quote from the ARC web site: <http://arc.cce.cornell.edu/>

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is in the part of Western New York that includes the economically depressed city of Buffalo, tells us about how gardening can be a vehicle for facilitating sustainable development.

Increasing Respect and Reverence for Life

The purpose of facilitating sustainable development links up with a second purpose we find educators speaking of in their profiles, especially Rick and Sally. This is the moral purpose of *increasing people's respect and reverence for life*.

In his profile, Rick uses the term “life-affirming” several times. “I am trying to make Extension a life-affirming place,” he says.

I'm also trying to get everybody on somewhat the same page about the things we need to do. I personally think we need to evolve if we are going to survive as a species. I just want to bring awareness to as many people as I can. I want people to think about the little things that they do and how that affects the whole world.

We learn about one of the ways Rick has pursued this goal when he tells us the story of a specific Extension project he helped to organize and conduct. In his words, the project

was focused on teaching fourth graders at the local elementary school some relevant information about their environment. I was going in one day a week for about eleven or twelve weeks. I taught them about how plants grow and how important it is for them to respect their environment. We talked about plants and about their relationship to the sun and the earth. We talked about the trees and the forests. We talked about things that they would do in their yard. We would talk about how they would actually have an effect down the road somewhere.

All this talk wasn't just “teaching information,” and it wasn't just teaching ecological principles. It was also teaching moral principles. But it wasn't abstract moralizing. Much of New York City's watershed is in Greene County. Therefore, things people “do in their yard” matter to millions of people. Rick recalls that the “main gist” of the message in his project

was that young people will become the people who will live here in the future. They should have some consciousness of what they do in their yard will end up in the watershed. It does not really matter where you live. You are always in somebody's watershed somewhere no matter what you do. You may think that it's not that relevant to go out and do this or do that in your yard but ultimately

it does end up as everybody's problem. So if you are conscientious of how you do things at home, you will have a positive effect on the world at large. The main point we tried to tell them was that there were a lot of things that they could do to make sure that they would keep their place safe, clean and pure. We taught them that in order for them to grow their own vegetables and flowers, they didn't have to go out and poison everything all the time. There was a better way to do it.

The moral principles he and his colleagues were teaching youth in this project included respect for life:

We tried to explain different things about their relationship to the forest and how, basically, those critters out there in the forest have been there for a long time, and they had to be respectful of them. We told them that it was not just all put there for their disposal. It wasn't just their playground. We explained that this is their home, and you have to have respect.

Like Rick, Sally Cunningham speaks in her profile of weaving the teaching of the moral principle of respect for life into her teaching of ecological information and principles. But in speaking of her Extension work, which focuses on gardening and community horticulture, she also speaks about her commitment to teach *reverence* for life:

Teaching about beneficial insects in the home garden is my best talk. It's not just that I want to teach people to be kind and not kill insects because of the inherent importance of the insects. That's true, yes. But I think we can get people to have a little reverence and wonder at all the things these insects are doing and how many of them are out there cooperating in what you want to achieve.

Behind Sally's commitment to "teaching people a respect for life and a reverence for the awe of nature and its systems," as she puts it, is a commitment to teaching "the idea that we aren't all in charge here."

We're not all controlling everything. You don't have to go out and buy a product to kill a bug just because you saw it. Rather, the more you understand about how it all works, the less you need to do that controlling thing. I really do think our society needs more people to think like that instead of those who see an ant in the house and go infect everybody by spraying two cans of Raid™. I definitely think people need help because they've lost touch with what our grandparents knew about nature. They knew that there are natural

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systems going on around us, and it's not the end of the world if a spider got in the living room.

In teaching about natural systems, Sally is not just showing people ecological connections, but societal connections as well. "In my educational approach," she says,

I like watching my students catch on to natural systems and how they work. They begin to understand that you can never do just one thing, like kill a bug, because this thing has to do with the next prey it was eating. In the same sense, whether it is our societal systems or in nature's systems, your impact on a child or your impact on a butterfly all has to do with a larger connection. In showing people the connections you are doing a lot of the real education.

Sally's use of the phrase "real education" is important. Several times in her profile, she speaks of "real" teaching, "real" learning, and "real" education. In doing so, she is making the point that education should be about more than providing and consuming information. It should be about the teaching and pursuit of larger purposes, values, and interests.

Sally has a flair for the dramatic, and she utilizes it as a tool for pursuing her larger moral purpose of increasing people's respect and reverence for life. "I do a sort of dramatic thing in one of my talks," she tells us,

where I'll be speaking about "What's the big deal about these insects" and then I'll suddenly slam a book on the floor and screech "YEEEE, I killed it!" Then I'll say, "Now what's wrong with that? Isn't there something wrong if we can just kill something we haven't named? We don't know what it's doing. We don't know what it had to do with us at all. Do we want a lot of kids growing up who can do that? You know, what else do they kill? What other larger creature is the next target? Is it your little kid on the playground they push aside?" I think this is really, truly important. At the simple kindness of humanity level, it's about being a respectful living being.

Here, Sally is giving voice to one of her deepest convictions: that the "gardening medium is a great way to teach people other values and skills." In other words, gardening is not just about gardening; it's about something larger. Like Rick, Sally sees gardening as a means of pursuing a moral purpose that gives her work as an Extension educator meaning. Also like Rick, she has a sense of urgency about this purpose that comes from her view of where things are headed:

We're going to get more crowded around here, and we better be able to ask,

“Gee, what kind of person is that? What is he doing?” Not judging, saying, “I gotta shoot him.” It’s really a scary world we’re entering, and I believe that respect for diversity is directly linked to how you feel about some creature you never met before. You decide it’s “creepy crawly” just because it’s unfamiliar. It really starts there.

Building Local Democracy

In his profile, Ken Schlather tells us what he was looking for as he searched for a job in the Finger Lakes region of New York State after spending many years abroad working for international rural development agencies. “I wanted to work in economic development,” he recalls, “and I wanted to work with an organization that really focused on strengthening individuals and communities, because I was interested in building democracy at a local level.” Here, Ken is helping us to see how to name the third purpose we find the educators in this book speaking of in their profiles: *building local democracy*. Ken ended up accepting the job of Executive Director of CCE-Tompkins County in

large measure because he saw Extension as an organization that is committed to this purpose.

Ken tells us that he left his international development work with the conviction that successful rural development projects are based on the principles of “local control, local people setting their own priorities, local people designing the solutions or the responses to the issues that they have identified, local people putting their own resources on the table, and then drawing

on the knowledge from universities or from people who aren’t necessarily part of that particular community.” According to him, these principles “are in the design of the Cooperative Extension System.” We see this in action in the story he tells us in his profile about Extension’s role in planning and organizing an energy efficiency initiative. The initiative was developed by a coalition of groups as a response to an emergency caused by the anticipated effects of increased energy costs on low and moderate-income consumers.

“We looked at this situation,” Ken recalls, “and thought if we could put infor-


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mation about low-cost, energy efficiency programs out in the newspapers and bulletins all over the place, a lot of people would make use of it. Those who did would benefit greatly.” But as we are learning from the educators in this book, Extension work is not just providing information. “If all we did was put information out,” Ken says, “we would have missed an opportunity for strengthening networks, and we would have blown an opportunity for laying the groundwork for a large scale, post-emergency energy efficiency program. We figured, though, that we could design something to allow for interaction between people.” Through their interactions while working together on the energy emergency, Ken explains, people “could begin to develop and strengthen their own networks in their communities and their own leadership skills. Then we could work with them in other ways in the future.”

While Ken’s story illustrates Extension’s work of providing trustworthy information to help people make informed decisions, it also illustrates what he refers to as the “other thing about Extension.” In his words, the “other thing” is the “idea of helping bring organizations or people together by facilitating processes. We help pull the resources together that exist locally to get something done.” Ken believes that by bringing people and organizations together in ways that follow principles of local control, priority setting, design and ownership, Extension helps to build democracy at a local level. Here, the meaning of “democracy” is not voting or partisan politics. Rather, it is democracy as a way of life, as an on-going practice in everyday places that engages people in what Harry Boyte refers to as public work: “sustained effort by a mix of people who solve public problems or create goods, material or cultural, of general benefit.”⁶

Andy Turner sees the purpose of building democracy at the local level through engaging people in public work as a crucial element of Extension’s relevance in contemporary society. In his profile, he notes that people are starting to ask the question of why the public should support Extension. “We should have an answer ready,” he says.



The democratic process that is part of the philosophy that ... Extension is “extending” is not just a way to make decisions; it is a way for Extension to pursue its human and community development mission.

⁶ Harry C. Boyte, *Everyday Politics: Reconnecting Citizens and Public Life* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), p. 5.

For us, I think the answer we are trying to give them is that we are one of the only organizations that focuses on quality of life issues. We are not reacting to each crisis. We are trying to build capacity in people and in communities. We serve as a facilitator, a link that can get people together, and as a result, things will move forward.

According to Andy, the “classic model of Extension is that it is a mechanism for disseminating the research-based knowledge of the faculty. I don’t think that we are doing a lot of that in that specific way.” Instead of research-based knowledge, he says that it is “the philosophy that we are extending, a philosophy that is born out of the land-grant system.” For Andy, this philosophy is based on a belief “that the quality of an endeavor is improved by combining local experiences, issues, and realities with some outside external perspective.” It is also based on a commitment to democracy. Speaking of CCE-Greene County’s work, Andy says: “We are not necessarily directing things to a certain outcome. We are interested in a democratic process where decisions and ideas include a diversity of people. That would be part of the philosophy too.”

The democratic process that is part of the philosophy that Andy says Extension is “extending” is not just a way to make decisions; it is a way for Extension to pursue its human and community development mission. Extension educators pursue this mission by providing opportunities for people to engage in meaningful public work. Such work includes gardening. As Sally Cunningham tells us in her profile,

Horticulture has a huge impact in community development. Let’s say you have a down-trodden, crime-ridden block with some empty lots. As soon as people come out and start building a garden in that lot and meeting on a regular basis, a change begins to occur. When people start coming out on the street, it brings out the best in some other people who can be attracted by that positive community energy. It also starts to make the area safer. It starts to be more attractive to a buyer of the empty house. Horticulture has a huge community rebuilding effect.

Such work also includes program development and community planning and visioning processes. In their profiles, Bob Beyfuss, Marilyn Wyman, Monika Roth, and Nancy Potter all speak of how they facilitate citizen engagement in these processes in ways that attend to the purpose of building local democracy. We learn something important about what this can involve and result in from each of these educators.

From Bob, who tells us that he often plays the role of a “cheerleader” who

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motivates engagement in public work by instilling a sense of pride in people about their communities, we learn that engagement in program planning can result in leadership development. As he tells us in his profile,

I love taking people that may start as a volunteer on a small sub-committee of a planning board, for example, and I watch these people develop as they realize that they can actually do things. The whole process of taking a person from a community and turning them into a leader is a wonderful thing. I think we do this well in Extension. We empower people. I don't particularly like that term, but I think it fits in this case: empowering local citizens to realize that they can make a difference. I think we all tend to be a little bit lazy, a little apathetic; we'll wait for somebody else to do it. If you can actually empower someone by convincing them that they can make a difference, then you've created something very powerful.

From Marilyn, we learn that the success of a community visioning process depends in large measure on the “kind of atmosphere and environment” facilitators create. Here is how she describes what she did to create an atmosphere during the first meeting of a community visioning process she facilitated in the Town of Cairo:

I created an overview about what needed to happen at that first meeting. I crafted an agenda that specifically talked about what their expectations were. I made assumptions about how the meeting should proceed. Instead of saying, “These are the guidelines we’re going to deal with,” I told them I assumed that “We’re here to represent the best interests of the town of Cairo. We will speak in ways that help us achieve the broadest and deepest understanding rather than speaking to win debating points. We’ll listen thoughtfully. We will assume that no one has the entire answer, that everyone is part of the answer and we’ll come away from this with a recommendation to present to the Cairo town board.”

From Monika, we learn that when educators deliberately organize planning committees in ways that include diverse interests and perspectives, they can contribute to the purpose of building local democracy. In her profile, she tells us that the agriculture program committee for CCE-Tompkins County used to include only representatives from agriculture. For a variety of reasons, she expanded the committee to include environmental and consumer interests as well. Now, she says, committee members

come together with many different agendas. It was much easier working with a strictly agriculture-based committee because there are more commonali-

ties. It is even easier working with just one commodity, like the dairy producers. The challenge is that we have many stakeholders on our program committee with various interests. The benefit is that they learn from each other and we try to find common interests to work on. The farmers are learning that there is consumer support for agriculture, and the environmentalists are interested in what happens on farms. They are learning that they aren't completely antagonistic. As the program has evolved, we have included more stakeholders. It is a way for everyone involved to learn from each other.

From Nancy, we learn how a view of Extension's historical role in communities can inform and reinforce an educator's commitment to build local democracy. In her words:

Extension's role is to constantly be looking ahead at what the issues in the community are, to look for opportunities for an educational response, intervention, or some sort of education that can have an impact on an issue. It's all about figuring out what the goals of the community are, *with* the community. That is historically how I see Cooperative Extension's role. It's what we have carved out as our niche in the community. We bring research and practices together, so they can be part of local discussion and action.

Importantly, we learn that Nancy's thinking about her work as an educator has evolved over time:

Thinking back over my career to about ten years ago, I wonder: how did I look at my job back then? Some of it is the same, but a lot of it has evolved to this place of knowing that education can be about facilitating and learning versus the classic: "Here I am. I have some knowledge and I want to share it with you. I want to impart this knowledge to you because it could improve your life." What is a facilitator if she or he doesn't help some process happen? All I am doing is helping people discover each other's passions

Instead of just imparting knowledge as an expert in family and consumer science, Nancy's work as a skilled facilitator now also includes helping processes move forward and helping people discover each other's passions. But this is not all Nancy is doing when she is facilitating. A crucial part of her role in facilitating community visioning processes, she tells us,

is to say, "Who is missing from the table? Who is missing from this conversation?" or "Who else do we need to hear from?" Their voice is important in creating the future. For me, this is a premise for this kind of work. I think it is

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for most community developers. That is, to be able to look at who is not there and to be able to ask, “Whose voice is missing?”

Here, Nancy is showing us one of the ways “the simple facilitator role can be a catalyst,” as she puts it, for building local democracy.

Significance


“I consider myself a catalyst,” Bob Beyfuss says in his profile. “A catalyst is something that speeds up a reaction that is probably going to happen anyway.” Speaking of his role in organizing the Agroforestry Resource Center (ARC), he says: “I basically helped a reaction that was going to occur, occur. I sped up the process.”

What Bob tells us here about his role in the ARC story may well be true. But like when Andy Turner said that Extension “allows” him to pursue his social change agenda, Bob is underplaying his leadership role in the ARC story. He is leaving something out that is key to answering the question I posed at the beginning of this essay about how we should understand the significance

of Extension educators’ work in contemporary society. We come to see what’s missing when we read Andy’s account of Extension’s role in the work of envisioning and organizing ARC. According to Andy, “Extension was the catalyst for this work; we were organizing this and conceiving of the idea and bringing all these groups together. *And then we were actually making it happen.*”

What we learn about Extension educators’ work by reading the profiles in this book isn’t that they help to speed up reactions that are probably going to occur anyway. Rather, it’s that they deliberately organize and facilitate people’s engagement in public work so that “reactions” that might *not* otherwise occur *will* occur. Instead of working from a responsive stance of neutrality, they work to facilitate learning and catalyze change from a proactive stance of commitment. The changes or “reactions” they seek to make happen are meant to advance their non-neutral commitments to sustainable development, respect and reverence for life, and local democracy. These are large and important purposes. When educators pursue them, it gives Extension a place of great significance in contemporary society.

Parker Palmer once wrote that “good teaching cannot be reduced to tech-



The educators in this book encourage us to look beyond the information and expertise Extension provides in order to understand not only what Extension is and does, but also how and why it matters.

nique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.”⁷ The identity and the integrity of the teachers we meet in this book reflect a principled embrace of a set of values, ideals, and purposes that give their work a distinctive *public* significance. The public significance of their work includes its economic contributions and impact. This is no small matter in upstate New York communities, most of which have suffered a dramatic loss of jobs over the past several decades. But just as good teaching cannot be reduced to technique, the public significance of good Extension work cannot be reduced to economics. In fact, good Extension work holds public significance in large measure because it is about *more* than economics, particularly the unsustainable, materialist, inequitable, and bottom-line oriented economics that dominates contemporary American culture.

“It feels like Extension has always been against the tide of the notion that the market is above everything,” Andy says in his profile.

I see the driving influence of most things in our culture being economics, defined in a very narrow way. I think Extension’s mission now is to be part of helping society to change the way we look at measuring what is a healthy community, what is a healthy democracy. That is where I see us needing to go. . . . We are trying to teach people how to do deeper things. When I look at the planning departments and economic developers and even the Chamber of Commerce, they need education too, because it seems they still have a fairly shallow accounting. They are looking at bringing things in that carry jobs. They are not looking at the whole perspective.

Working against the tide of the narrowly defined economics that Andy sees as the driving influence of most things in our culture, Extension stands for “looking at the whole perspective.” We get a vivid account of this in the following passage from Rick Burstell’s profile:

We just had our big staff meeting the other day. It was all about our Extension mission and all the things that Cornell Cooperative Extension is going to be involved in here in Greene County. It was so impressive to me; it was all positive. When I was involved with private industry, we always had a graph on the wall with the numbers, and that was what it was all about. The only thing that mattered was the numbers. If the numbers were going up, everything was fine. It didn’t matter if everybody in the place was suffering or not; it was all about the numbers. Here we want to improve this community. We want to

⁷ Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of A Teacher’s Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), p. 10.

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make the people in this community more informed. We want to help them to make the right decisions in their life. We want to teach them to have a healthier attitude, to eat healthier, to be healthier towards their neighbors, and to embrace and protect the beautiful natural environment that they have around them.

Reading this passage, I'm reminded again of Andy's line about Extension: "It's not just providing information." Not only Andy, but all of the educators in this book encourage us to look beyond the information and expertise Extension provides in order to understand not only what Extension is and does, but also how and why it matters. But in doing so, we must not overlook the deep importance of information and expertise. Here, we need to listen to what Sally Cunningham tells us in her profile:

I heard some discussion about how Extension educators aren't going to be the experts anymore in their content areas, but I don't agree with that. I think the content is the vehicle. It's what we get known for. It's why people come to us, whether it's the greenhouse expert or the dairy agent or the nutrition person or the gardening lady. They're going to come to us for the content, but when they do, they also get the larger life principles: learning how to learn, how to think, how to research, how to solve problems for themselves. They get a lot more than the quick answers in all of our content areas, but we still need the gardening as the lure to get them in the door. They're not going to come to a meeting on "How to be a Better Citizen." Nobody would come to meetings on that. But they come to a "Gardening in your Community" class, and pretty soon they're interacting with people they wouldn't have talked to before.

Extension matters and is significant not only or mainly because it has information and expertise, but rather because of how and for what purposes it brings people, information, and expertise together. The "best of gardening," Sally tells us in her profile, is "when it's much more than planting flowers." So, too, the best of Extension is when it's much more than providing information.