

# profile

## Monika Roth

*Agriculture and Environment Program Leader  
Cornell Cooperative Extension, Tompkins County*

**I** call myself the Agriculture and Environment Program Leader. Cornell calls us Extension Issue Team Leaders. The issue team that I'm leading is the Agriculture and Environ-

**INTERVIEWED BY**

**Kim Niewolny**

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ment Program. I've been working as the agriculture program leader in Tompkins County for about fifteen years, and I've been involved in coordinating the regional team for about six years now.

My responsibilities have really changed over time. When I started I was the only person in the program.

There was no team to lead, but I was hired as the program leader. Now I have people working with me. My team includes about eight people in the Tompkins County office. There are four other educators working within our regional team. So my responsibilities now include working outside of Tompkins County in four other counties.

My current responsibilities are divided into two main areas. One area is managing Tompkins agriculture and environment programs. The other area is the ag-economic development and marketing programming piece which evolved from being a program leader. A lot of program leaders are agriculture generalists covering a wide variety of topics. My job responsibilities within the regional team context are ag-economic development and marketing and a bit of policy education, which is about forty percent of what I do. The other twenty percent is then related to regional team leadership. The remaining forty percent is related to Tompkins County



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ag and environment program leadership and development.

Agriculture is really a large issue area here in Tompkins County. The programs that have evolved over the last twenty years include our horticulture program, which was originally part of my job. Today, it is a self-standing program with its own horticulture program manager. We have an agriculture program manager who is my right hand assistant. We also have a compost program manager and an environmental educator, which is an agent level position. We have a new program educator called the community beautification coordinator. We have staff for the Ithaca's Children's Garden, which includes three people. We also have the secretary for our team. That's the county piece of it.

The regional team is responsible for addressing the needs of the agriculture industry. The county team addresses local issues, like the home gardening program. The regional team is organized so that each of us has a subject area we are responsible for in the five counties that we work in. So across the five counties, we have divided the agriculture subject areas according to the types of producers we have in the region.

I lived on a farm when I was very young. After we moved to this country, we moved to the city. I was born in Austria. My family came to the United States when I was five. I grew up and went to school in Ohio. Basically, I became an American. Most of my relatives are still in Austria and all over Germany. We still go there; we still have close connections.

I grew up in Mansfield, Ohio. It's in the center of the state. I was the first child. I was an independent kid because my parents were immigrants. I learned how to speak English. They could not speak English very well so I was their ambassador. That part probably made it hard for them. After high school, I went to a liberal arts school called Wittenberg University. I focused on a science curriculum. My real inspiration for science was my high school biology teacher, Mr. Poffenbaugh. He still is a mentor. He writes a gardening column in our hometown paper. It's interesting that we still have a common interest. He was much more visual and engaging about his teaching, which is one of the ways you learn more. I also had a good French teacher. Because of good teachers, those were my two options when I went to college. It was basically biology or French. I did study a little French, but decided I could always pursue languages so I stuck with the sciences.

My degree is in biology with a focus in plant science. At some point in college, I realized I was interested in agriculture. I became interested because I read Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. Reading that certainly had an influence. Not that I wanted to go spraying everything. I wanted to understand insects. The thing that stuck out for me in the book was the position of the Extension entomologist. So I thought

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maybe that was what I wanted to do. I didn't know anything about Extension or 4-H. So that connection, knowing that someone can work in agriculture, came from the reference in the book. Of course, the entomologist was the bad guy in that book, but I still thought it was an interesting area. I don't really know why I wanted to be working on insects, its not that I liked them, but I decided to pursue entomology as a possible career.

Once I decided to study agriculture sciences, I took a semester away from Wittenberg. I went to Ohio State my senior year to take a lot of the courses Wittenberg didn't offer, like soil science, entomology and plant pathology. I had maxed out what I could take at Wittenberg because their science degree would lead you to a PhD track, but I wanted pursue applied sciences.

In hindsight, I was pretty directed. I purposely sought science related jobs. I worked at the agriculture experiment Extension station in Wooster, Ohio in the summers during college. I looked for something that related to my interests. I didn't just go home and work at Burger King. I knew I wanted a job related to science, so I got a job at the experiment station. I had a real great experience working there. That environment is so positive. The benefit of working at an experiment station is the respect that you get from the faculty working there versus on campus. There is a feeling of hierarchy in the university system that you don't get at an experiment station. The lowly technician is valued. You feel like your opinion is listened to. It makes you feel more a part of the whole process. You learn more from that; it's motivating. It was a really good environment to work in. I worked in the entomology department for two summers. Then I transferred over to a USDA Japanese beetle lab and worked another year for them after I completed college. That was also good experience. It was fun, and I learned something. It was a combination of finding the jobs at the experiment station in the summer and taking the courses at Ohio State that kept me on track of wanting to be an entomologist.

After I graduated from college, I continued to work for the USDA Japanese beetle lab, but I was looking for permanent jobs. I wanted to work with some rather famous entomologists at the Geneva experiment station<sup>8</sup>. So I visited Geneva and met with these two guys. I asked if they had any jobs available at the station, and

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<sup>8</sup> New York State Agricultural Experiment Station (NYSAES) <http://www.nysaes.comell.edu/>

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found out more about their work. It was an informational interview. They said they didn't have anything there, but they sent me down to Cornell. I didn't know anything about Cornell, so I said "OK." They sent me to interview with a plant pathologist, Otto Schultz, at Cornell who had a job opening, I had the interview, and he hired me.

So I came to Cornell working in plant pathology. I didn't really like plant pathology in college, but I was good at it. I worked in the department for six years doing Extension work. This was the Extension connection. I worked with Extension folks across the state supporting plant diagnostic work for vegetables and field crops. I was their support. For example, if Extension staff came across a disease problem, they would send the plant sample to Cornell. I would then diagnose it and give them the information about what to do about the disease. We also did a lot of field trials with the Extension agents. We would have plots looking at different diseases and how they were controlled by different chemicals. Sometimes we evaluated variety resistance to a disease. It was a typical technician job but my boss gave me a lot of freedom to take on projects. I really liked it; it got me across the state.

We would also do talks at farmer meetings and conferences. I got to the point where I was writing Extension publications and doing the talks at winter meetings. I was not the behind the scenes type of technician. Then my boss got cancer. I was basically running the program during the time he was sick for almost two years. After Otto passed away, I had another boss. But there was a period of time when I was basically 'it' in the field crops area.

I got to know the Extension people around the state and learned about what they did. I decided I wanted to become an Extension agent. Extension was more production oriented then, and since I already had the entomology and plant pathology training, I felt qualified to do the work. These were two strong disciplines I had under my belt. Also, I had experience with: fruit crops, turf from the USDA Japanese beetle work, vegetables, and field crops. So I had developed a solid knowledge of pest problems for both insects and plant diseases on a variety of crops. That made me fairly versatile. Also, having a good science background really helped prepare me for an Extension career.

When I was at Cornell, I started working on a Master's degree in Integrated Pest Management (IPM). I was taking courses that were job related so I thought I might as well just get a degree out of it. Then the agriculture Extension job opened up here in Tompkins County, and I decided to apply for the job. So instead of pursuing the degree in IPM, I got the job.

For the first three or four years of working here, I was providing leadership for the vegetables, fruits, ornamentals, and the home gardening programs. Early on, I

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was a production horticulture Extension educator working with industry. But the farmers said, “We don’t need help with production; we can grow anything. We need help with marketing.” So I started to shift my work towards marketing after the first four years of my job. I decided what the farmers were telling me was what they needed, so I went back to school to get my Master’s degree in agricultural economics at Cornell University. As a result, and also because of the kinds of farmers we have here in the area, I’m probably considered to be a statewide specialist in direct marketing. I have given talks nationally and internationally and am well known for my knowledge of direct farm marketing.

In 1980, when I started with Extension, there was a team of staff working with the dairy and field crops producers. My job as a program leader was to assure that the needs of all producers were being addressed. It is the farm community who establishes the priorities for our programming. The Cooperative Extension team then develops the program plan accordingly. My job is to interact with the county agriculture program committee to facilitate the input process. I need to understand what they feel are the highest priority needs. My team and I would then develop educational programs that would address the needs that were identified. That is my concept of the leadership piece of my job.

It’s about listening. It’s understanding what people’s issues are as well as being able to synthesize all that information. You then have to turn around and develop an educational response, like a program. It is really important to be able to sort through the input I get from the farmers, or whoever else I’m dealing with, to be able to find out what is really behind the

information that they are giving me. A farmer might say, “Taxes are an issue. Our taxes are just too high.” I don’t think that has changed in the last twenty years. The real problem is income on farms. Taxes are just a piece of the cost of doing business. I try to help farmers figure out the pieces they can control. It’s really about listening to individuals at a meeting or in other venues and being able to read between the lines. It’s also about being able to facilitate a program committee meeting and pull out of farmers what some of the issues are and be able to turn around and say, “OK, this sounds like the issue. Maybe this is what we can do about it.”

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Program committee meetings were at one time conducted about once a month. We hold them about six times a year now. The challenge to getting good input is good representation and participation on the agriculture program committee. We really need to make sure we get a fair number of folks who can come to the table and be heard. That is something I try to work on. I try to make sure the committee

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is comprised of people who truly represent the industry, people who can speak for the industry. Their voices are the ones bringing the information to us about what they think their particular agriculture needs are. That's what it's about. For example, I make sure there are two, three, or four dairy representatives on our program committee because it's the county's largest ag sector. I try to make sure we include a vegetable producer, a livestock producer,

and a nursery and greenhouse businessman or woman. Now we have an expanded committee with even broader interests including environmental and consumer interests.

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

We add new committee members by asking, "Who should be here?" We ask established committee members to suggest new members and programs. Ideas for programs also come from people here at Extension. We ask around to get new input. When we offer a workshop, or arrange a meeting, we get ideas for future programs from attendees. We get of input for programs from one-on-one meetings and from the calls that we get. Programs are developed not just from the committee members' input but from all levels of interaction with our audiences. For example, vegetable producers are always concerned with deer. We always know that deer are

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high on their priority list. I might only have one vegetable producer on my committee, and they might have an opinion to what is important for them. But because I am interacting with vegetable producers in many other venues, I can make sure the opinions that one person is sharing are really valid. I can bring in new opinions, and I can help make the committee aware of other ideas and concerns.

It's about balancing the programs, essentially. It's a process. It's taking note of ideas that we hear, and not letting the little things that are being said escape. It's really important to capture all the ideas I can. I feel that the input process to our programs is really just a matter of not losing information that gets passed onto you. I do that by keeping it in my head, but also by bringing it to the program committee. I share it with my staff saying, "OK, here is what has been brought up as an issue; how might we address this further?"

The plan of work process helps with gathering ideas too. It is about putting as much on the table as one can then being able to sort and prioritize it. The plan of work process is a major effort of identifying issues and organizing them. We do this every four years. We've done a pretty good job of it. This time around, we did a fairly extensive survey of the agriculture industry. The survey was conducted at the county and regional level. Regionally, we mainly worked with the program committee people. Our next step after getting input is to bring the industry people back together, and then ask, "OK, here is the list. Here is what we've sorted out. Are these the right things for you?" We are constantly checking in with people to make sure our programs address relevant needs. Once we have a list of needs, and have identified what our goals are, the next challenge is making sure our programs stay in line with the goals we set. For example, deer are primarily an issue for the vegetable, fruit and ornamentals industries. What can Extension do? How can we help them with this issue? It's really a DEC<sup>9</sup> matter. We need to look at who is already addressing the particular issue. We have to ask, "What is our role?" When we identify an issue, there is this big filtering process. It's second nature to me now. First of all, when someone raises an issue we have to ask, "Is this in the Extension mission?" Some policy issues might be something that Farm Bureau should address. This process helps us focus our programs on what our roles and capabilities are while addressing real concerns of farmers.

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<sup>9</sup> Department of Environmental Conservation: <http://www.dec.state.ny.us/>

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The ag development and marketing program area is unique because it is driven in part by what counties have identified in their agriculture and farmland protection plans. Most counties in the region have an agriculture and farmland protection plan. The group that leads that planning process is an Agriculture and Farmland Protection Board. This is separate from our program committee. It's a board of county government. The Agriculture and Farmland Protection plan serves as the basis for ag-economic development. There are many approaches to developing agriculture in a county. There are some regional differences because each county has unique industry characteristics to address. For example, Schuyler County has a strong wine industry; that is a unique characteristic to keep in mind. Chemung has a large commercial horticulture industry. Tioga has a lot of small farms. Cortland has a lot of dairy farms. So each county is unique. My job is to look at the strengths of each county's agriculture sector and build on it. I take a localized approach for community involvement, yet I'm trying to offer programs that meet needs across the regional area. There are some ag development and marketing issues that can be addressed at the regional level and some that are better addressed at the county level. An effective ag and farmland protection board and ag plan enhances the ability of Extension to address agriculture's needs by offering a variety of approaches.

The marketing piece includes supporting farmers' markets to help them flourish. In some communities the markets aren't really a viable outlet for farmers. The other piece is to identify new marketing opportunities for producers. For instance, I've been providing leadership for the Finger Lakes Culinary Bounty program (FLCB)<sup>10</sup>. It's about linking local farmers and food producers to area restaurants. Fortunately and unfortunately, the FLCB program has been taking much of my time. It could be a full time job. It would be nice to be able to have someone manage it entirely but we need to find funds for that. Ultimately, it is a program that I hope to spin off from Extension.

The FLCB program is an outgrowth of working with direct marketing. The farmers' markets are an example of direct marketing. FLCB focuses on the connection between local farms and restaurants, and other food establishments. It's about making a more purposeful restaurant and tourism connection for farmers. I've also been exploring ways to get local farm products into Cornell University dining. We already have local foods in farmers' markets and some stores.

The name Finger Lakes Culinary Bounty was something that a chef came up with. The reason we even got together as a group was because two or three years ago we organized a conference on agriculture tourism in this region. At the conference,

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.fingerlakesculinarybounty.org/>

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there were different themes. One of the themes was about connecting the food from local farms with hospitality sectors. It was about creating local cuisine, regional cuisine, which is something that has been happening around the country. There are a lot of models to follow including Berkshire Grown and the Vermont Fresh Network. I was exposed to the California work a long time ago. I spent some time out in California, and was very familiar with the farmer-restaurant connection work being done out there.

This local, regional cuisine tourism concept was bubbling up all over the place. The next year, we organized a meeting devoted to regional cuisine. We invited folks from the Vermont Fresh Program to speak. We also invited local chefs that were working with local farmers. The meeting was a way to get people together. After that meeting people really started to get excited about forming a Finger Lakes Farm and Food Network. We had the idea, but we really hadn't made anything happen yet. One of the chefs on the panel, Henry Benveniste, became the spark plug for FLCB. In 1999, we started hosting monthly meetings that included farmers, tourism representatives, restaurant owners, and chefs. Like all start-up organizations, we spent time writing the mission statement. It really was a grassroots kind of thing, and still is. It was just a bunch of people getting together trying to develop a concept and figure out what we really wanted to do with this idea. How could we develop the concept of regional cuisine in the Finger Lakes? It evolved naturally. We invited some people who we knew from the community that were interested in developing a local connection with food and restaurants. It all started as a Cayuga-Tompkins County Extension effort.

As an Extension person, many times you end up taking a leadership position. I think this is because we gain a lot of process skills during training as Extension educators. Also, in many groups, the others are volunteers, like farmers; and don't have the time or supporting infrastructure like we do. I tend to take on leadership roles and will usually step in and assume responsibility. I just started saying, "OK, I will take the notes; I will do what you need to get this going." I have been involved right from the beginning with FLCB. The reality is someone like Henry is a great idea person, but follow through was difficult with his business. He was great. He was the front person marketing the idea of FLCB, but there wasn't any logistical follow

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through. I provided the foundation to keep FLCB moving forward. We started with organizational meetings and invited more people from a broader region, so we could expand the project to the Finger Lakes. I would call them networking meetings. We still have annual networking meetings for chefs and farmers. It's really about them networking to develop business relationships, not for us educators.

Things have developed further. Now we host a trade show every year where farmers and food producers from the Finger Lakes come with their products. Also, chefs and other buyers come. It's growing slowly every year. I think the biggest challenge is working across fourteen counties. It's a big region. Yet it makes sense to work across the Finger Lakes because on a county level, you just don't have that regional identity. The idea is to create that regional identity linking wineries, farms and food establishments. The wineries have been very supportive.

We have now built the program into a large membership organization. The way we built the membership was through networking meetings, the trade shows and conferences. People would fill out forms to sign up to become members of the program offering their support. It's been built up enough to where we have put together an on-line directory of producers and restaurants. We have built up the database over the years, even beyond the membership. The total number of interested supporters and producers comes to about 400. The actual paid members are about 120.

It's been interesting working on FLCB because it has been an easy concept to explain. Everyone gets it. Public response has been positive. The program is still in its infancy though. It needs the next level, which is a business plan. We have a board of directors, but I feel that our board is not functioning well. We don't have by-laws, and we are not an independent non-profit organization. This is the kind of project that Extension needs to spin off. I've been writing the grants for it. We got a \$28,000 grant from NY Agriculture and Markets to conduct a distribution study. We have gotten other little grants that have supported the program too. I will probably write a couple of other big grants that I hope will get us to the point where we can hire staff. My goal is to transition FLCB out of Extension so it can be its own entity. It's a project that should have its own life. It will. It's now about laying the foundation. That is where we as Extension educators can serve a valuable role. We have a chef who is president of the board and another chef is vice president and there are other interests represented on the board. It is a good mix of people, but everyone is really busy. They really are committed to this whole concept, but they need somebody to provide the staff support.

Because this program is such a big effort, I have to balance it with my other responsibilities. I've been able to do it by having some part-time staff that I hire

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with the fees and grants from the program. The Tompkins County Extension secretary keeps the database. Part of what hampers the development of an organization like this is not having staff support. Not that we aren't providing good staff support, but we just can't provide everything that is needed to make it grow. It's getting to the five year mark, so if we can get a business plan together and get a good solid chunk of money, we could become self-sufficient. That's where we are for now. Our goal for the end of the year is to have a business plan set in place. We also want to have some funding so we can hire staff.

One of our efforts is focusing on marketing FLCB to consumers. We need information to make consumers aware of FLCB and to support the idea of local foods. We try to let people know that local, regional food is available year round and to increase consumer demand for local foods. We need more restaurant participation and commitment to buying local. That doesn't seem to be a problem; there are many who are interested. As for the farmers, we are working on the distribution project that will help streamline the process of getting products to restaurants. What we are doing now is faxing a weekly list of available products from farms to the 100 restaurants. The farms provide the information; we fax it to chefs.

Other groups around the state are also addressing ways to improve farmer-buyer connections. We are working with the Finger Lakes Organic Growers Cooperative (FLO)<sup>11</sup>, which has been struggling with distribution as an issue. There is another group called Catskills Family Farms distributing goods to New York City. There is another group called Adirondack Harvest<sup>12</sup>, which is another regional identity program patterned after FLCB. I was working with them on a consulting basis and helped get them started. They have really taken off with their program. I think it is because they are a little more focused on developing a buy-local campaign, not the restaurant piece.

FLCB is an example of a multi-year, major regional effort that takes time to show results. I can't say we haven't had any results. After every trade show I get emails from vendors that say they have x number of new customers from this event. We are not trying to be a broker. We don't have the sales force out there, maybe as an organization down the road, but that's what they need, and that is not our role.

My role in this whole process is to support the effort so we can continue to open doors for the farmers in terms of market opportunities. But we aren't going to hold their hand through it; they also have to take some of the initiative. They have to be a part of the program, getting their product information to us, and doing some

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<sup>11</sup> <http://fingerlakesorganic.com/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.adirondackharvest.com/>

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of their own face-to-face marketing. We have the printed directory so they can go through it and call these restaurants. We were the ground workers in this whole thing. We need to keep it rolling. I'm tenacious enough that once I start something I'm not going to let it fail. So it will happen. It is already happening in some ways. Having new people involved in the program all the time keeps the energy up.

Another long-term project I'm working on is to try to expand the support system for agriculture. We are trying to identify programs that farmers can use that are already available to other non-farm businesses. I've worked a lot with Cortland

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Industrial Development Agency and they are very supportive of agriculture. They are a resource for all businesses. They provide low interest loans for major expansions. Granted, the kind of projects they would be interested in tends to be the bigger projects, like a big dairy project or a new dairy barn, but there is no reason why other agriculture businesses can't fit into their program parameters. The idea is to open the doors for farmers to work with economic developers. This is something I will have to do county by county

since it's not a regional issue. I need to get them to see that the business infrastructure can serve agriculture. Each county has their own interests and some like Tompkins County may not be interested in serving agribusiness needs, but I am starting to work on changing that.

It's tough. It takes a long time to produce tangible change. We are working to build support for agriculture that down the road will hopefully have some pay off. But now, it's just opening the doors. So agricultural development work, like FLCB, takes a long time before you see the results. It takes tenacity to make sure things really happen for people. I think that's the hardest thing in the big scheme of things. People don't really expect results over night, but what I have learned is that they don't want to wait too long. It takes small steps along the way that lead to the overall goal.

I put a lot of emphasis on helping farmers with grant opportunities. There have been an increasing number of grants available that farmers can apply for themselves. I have done a lot of education to increase farmer awareness of grants. In fact, everyone around the state now refers to the list of grant opportunities for farms that

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I developed. Cornell's Community Food and Agriculture Program (CFAP)<sup>13</sup> and the Small Farm Program<sup>14</sup> are promoting the information on their websites. I felt that the farmers did not know about grant programs they could be taking advantage of. Part of my job is to make sure they are aware of them. There really is a lot of information out there. I think they should be in touch with it to help themselves.

Working through people to make change is not always the work you do directly. It's really about working with people. I'm on several county committees and boards representing agriculture, like the Tompkins County Planning and Advisory Board and the Agriculture and Farmland Protection Plan Board. Extension provides what I call staff support to county

government for educational outreach and information on agriculture. In Tompkins County we have to lead the process for the county in developing our agriculture and farmland protection plan. In other counties, agriculture and farmland protection plans are driven by county planning. In this case, here in Tompkins, I felt Extension was in a

better position to lead the process and stepped up to the plate. I feel if I hadn't been writing the grants and pushing the planning process along, the plan would not have had such broad agricultural support. You can't be shy; you have to interject yourself and take what I felt was an Extension leadership role, to make sure a plan was done. Now we can continue with the plans. We really worked hard to get the implementation process started. I can't be at every ag and farmland board meeting in the region; but I can be a resource for them. That is what I do in the other counties, especially Tioga. If there isn't a strong person driving the process locally, it doesn't happen. We need to position ourselves as the resource for agriculture information for county government. We do the surveys and analyze the data for county government. We should be seen as the organization that you go to if you need information about agriculture. I think we have done that in Tompkins County.

In some cases we operate in the background. I look at the work I've done over the years with the Ithaca Farmers' Market. They are pretty solid as an organization, but they still rely on me for certain things. I'm the fall back advisor. They know they can get support from me. I keep them informed about grant opportunities. I

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.cfap.org>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.smallfarms.cornell.edu>

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help lead the process in thinking about their future vision. I've also helped them through some difficult board issues. I'm in the background if they need me. They can call on me for major issues. They don't need help with day-to-day issues. Over the years, that's been our Extension role. For instance, when they needed to sign the lease with the City of Ithaca, we helped to make sure they were in touch with the right players. I have dealt with city government before, so I can help them figure out who to talk to and let them know what the procedure will be like. It's that kind of background. We are here to help them succeed. That's how I see it.

I keep saying "we." I'm the program leader. I'm the facilitator to some degree, but I do get input. So I do refer to "we." It's not just my own ideas, it's the collective ideas received from many people that we are implementing. Certainly, a lot of them are my ideas, but I am not comfortable always saying, "I did this; I did that." I really do feel like it's "we." I am the representative of the organization leading the process, and I do get input. Before, when I didn't have staff, obviously, I was leading the process. Now I have staff or committee people. I always have committee people providing input and the reality-check for what we do in our program. They are the group I go to make sure we are working on real issues. The staff each has their defined program area, but within that they have latitude to develop the program as they see fit.

**We often serve the catalyst role for starting new programs and helping them move to another level. That's the role I like to play, getting programs up and going.**

We are often in the background saying, "Here's a possibility we can help facilitate." We bring a lot to the table, but ultimately we have been steering the process because we have been able to get grant money. If we don't have the funding, there is no way we can do it. With grant money there is a lot more ownership involved which means that

more responsibility for the project goes to the community. We often serve the catalyst role for starting new programs and helping them move to another level. That's the role I like to play, getting programs up and going. We started Citizen Pruners<sup>15</sup> and Master Composters<sup>16</sup>. These programs almost have a life of their own. I can stand back now, but I don't completely because I'm still the person who gets the money for these programs. At this point in my career, I'm spending more of my time writing grants and finding new opportunities for funding programs and staff. I'm

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<sup>15</sup> <http://counties.cce.cornell.edu/tompkins/CitizenPruners/index.htm>

<sup>16</sup> <http://counties.cce.cornell.edu/tompkins/compost/mastercomposter.html>

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always on the lookout for a program opportunity that looks like it would be good for the agriculture community. I would really love some of the jobs that I have created for my staff. But I'm part of the work; I'm an advisor to their work. I'm just glad to see the programs serving the purpose we had envisioned. The thing I like the most is the creativity of programming. It's like "come up with an idea and do it!"

I feel like we have so much luxury in Extension to come up with an idea and have the power to implement it. On campus, it seems like you don't have that direct opportunity to be able to come up with an idea and carry it all the way to seeing it actually happen in the community. That is what is so great about Extension. I think that is what makes me good at my job is that I tend to be a creative programmer. I can easily come up with ten ideas on how to address an issue that others may not come up with. I like to feed others' creative ideas. I also look for opportunities and solutions to problems. It is sowing the seed, and getting others to buy in, and then the program gets established. It may take a few years, but it works. You just have to look for opportunities.

I try to stay on top of the new information coming out. I meet with folks at state and national conferences. I am a big part of many local meetings. I have good connections. It's about listening to people and gathering good ideas. Reading helps too. Newsletters are a great source of information. Getting to a few of the national conferences really seems to be a good source of inspiration.

Do I use campus as a resource? If I were in production agriculture I would more, but since I'm not, I don't. I work with Nelson Bills in the Ag Econ Dept at Cornell. I also use the Small Farms Program and CaRDI (Cornell's Community and Rural Development Institute).<sup>17</sup> I connect with the folks at CFAP (Cornell's Community, Food, and Agriculture Program).<sup>18</sup> So those are the programs I do connect with, but I wouldn't call them a big resource. I do more with Nelson because he is a good data cruncher and I'm not, so he is a great resource. But since we all are working under the same sphere, I can bounce ideas off, and I get input. I like to find out if they have heard about a new something or other. It's that kind of a relationship.

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.cardi.cornell.edu/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.cfap.org>

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Educators need people skills first. It's important to have the ability to interact with a whole range of people. The next skill is not to make assumptions about people and their ideas. Many people come to us, especially in agriculture, with ideas about farming or other projects. Sometimes they may seem wacky, but in reality, you never know who or how someone is going to succeed. It really depends on the person. Often it is their personalities that will make the project succeed. They might have the qualities of a good entrepreneur even if their project idea sounds kind of wacky, or what someone else might perceive as a wacky idea. So it is important to be able to work with a wide variety of people, and to avoid being judgmental about any idea they might have. My role, regardless of what someone comes to me with, is to help them achieve what they want to achieve. This can apply to the home gardener, the farmers, and the volunteers we work with. We try to figure out ways to be able to help them get there.

When you're first out of college, you have all this book knowledge. One thing I have learned is to avoid a textbook response. I notice new staff may tend to jump to a conclusion too quickly without getting enough information. The reality is that you have to ask questions initially. You can't make judgments. You're not the answer person; you're the question person. The idea is to be able to ask the right

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questions. You can only give the right answers if you know what questions to ask. I think that this is really important. You learn this from making mistakes along the way. When you start out, you think, "OK, I have to have the answer." I learned to ask questions early since I didn't know all the answers, so I would just say, "I will just have to get back to you." You learn a ton because you do the research and figure the question out before you get back to the people. The other thing that I learned early in my career was to get back to

people promptly. I feel a high level of responsibility towards the client or the public. I try to get back to people. Even though these days, I'm not nearly as good as I used to be because I am too busy. I try to promote a customer service attitude among my staff. I make sure that they are getting back to people and not leaving them dangling. Making sure they are giving good service and good information is an important skill.

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Another skill, which is an interesting one, is program planning and needs assessment. I think I learned this through in-service Extension training. The training I had was just invaluable. When I first started, I felt they did a lot more of this. We had regional and statewide training programs on plan of work development that provided me with a really good grounding in planning processes when I first came into the Extension system.

One of the skills I have, more intuitively, is to be able to assess a situation and read between the lines. To be able to take an idea, concept, or issue someone is raising and turn it around into an educational program or a positive response. Just to be perceptive all the time. For example, at a farmers' market board meeting I learned that NY Ag. and Markets was inspecting markets so I realized, I needed to remind farmers about the selling requirements. It's about being able to identify program needs wherever you are. It's using these opportunities to be able to say, "Okay, here is a need. This is something we should be dealing with." You also must be able to really listen to folks. When you first start in Extension, you are just expected to know how to do your job. I think you need to be aggressive enough to search for those creative ideas and to be able to put things together in terms of a program. That takes both initiative and experience.

For many of us in agriculture, we come into the system with a science background. The people who succeed are the ones who are willing to work at the whole community level, not just the microscopic level. In some ways, Extension is the greatest place to keep learning. You are exposed to a variety of opportunities, and you're not confined to only one discipline. Some people are specialists, like a dairy specialist. Yet even in the world of dairy they still have many opportunities. When I left plant pathology and became an Extension educator, the most difficult transition was not having the time to work at an in-depth level. That was a hard transition for me because I felt I was not being thorough in my work. When you work on a research team, you are much more focused and thorough. Some people don't make that transition well. If you really are someone who is over attentive to every single detail, this job would kill you. Then again, there are jobs in Extension that are more focused than mine. You just have to have a ton of flexibility. You have to be able to

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respond to many needs at once and remain flexible about the whole process. You can't be locked into one idea or program. It's good to remain open to new possibilities. But, you just don't want to completely go with the flow; that can eat you alive.

Setting and following priorities when developing a project are key.

**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 the people to make change.**

So it's about having those process skills down. I think it's about the whole plan of work process. It's a process of gaining input and understanding community needs. I feel like the community comes up with the structure, and I help them to get involved in leading the process. It's not about me saying, "This is how it should be." It's about getting community input and involvement.

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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 the people to make change. It's much more community based when you involve people for change.

I love working with the farm community and on behalf of the farm community. I do work on their behalf. The other part I love is the opportunity to be creative. All of the programs we do here inspire my creativity. I think about ways to help the people in the community. Sometimes it takes someone to step in and push an idea along. That's what I like to do. Why agriculture? I like agriculture because it connects to a natural instinct I have for gardening. Maybe it also comes from being born on a farm. It has been an evolutionary process. It probably grew out of having so many connections with the farmers over the years. I really value them. I feel that I have a good command of what the issues are in agriculture, and I think that they are interesting and challenging. It affects the whole continuum, everything from the producers to the consumers. I think about the choices we make as consumers and how it influences a whole sector of the economy.

I feel like a lot of what I am doing now relates to land use planning and government. I work with a lot of government agencies. I also enjoy the international opportunities here at Extension. There are many dimensions to my work, which says a lot about the kind of work Extension educators do. Any one of the many things I do I find interesting. I could work on any one of the projects that I am involved with and like it. I would love to just do the marketing piece, like with the

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farmers' markets and FLCB stuff. I actually like the board work, too. Any one of these areas could be a full time job.

My team helps carry the work out. It's fun that way. There are many aspects of this job that I just really enjoy. People here have to be committed to this work in order to get the job done well. It's a lot of work. You are always on call, which is only one part of it. This is a public service agency, so people are always asking for information. The other part of the job is to develop and deliver programs. Sometimes these two demands are conflicting in terms of time. I could spend the whole day answering the phone and not get any of the other work done.

The thing that I have learned about hiring people for this work is to look for someone who can be flexible. I try to help my staff in that transition from college to the world of reality. That can be difficult. I would advise anyone interested in Extension work to develop an area of expertise that they can become known for. I started with a solid knowledge of plant pathology and entomology, which gave me a subject area that was helpful to farmers. I could relate with the production issues. I was good at this one thing when I started, but then you are thrown into many new projects. You have to become flexible. You just have to establish your credibility in some area first, to establish credibility with the farm community, or with whomever you are working with. You do need to be good at something and become respected for that. Then you can go beyond that. Then you can grow from there. You can spread your wings in many ways in Extension. We have people that are succeeding because they are willing to work hard at staying on top of one area. That also keeps me going.

Extension has been a great place to be for me. I care for the whole system. I really do. I think Extension here is structured really well. It's just great to see the energy in the staff. It's really paying off. It's just fun to see a concept just take off. It really does matter about the people. You just can't give up. Sooner or later it will pay off.