

Musical Chairs: Preparing Extension Communication Units for Inevitable Change

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Abstract

What happens when a new university administration doesn't know what Extension does or why an Extension communication unit exists? In this paper, a group of Extension administrators and faculty examines several reasons university administrators might seek to downsize Extension services or eliminate their communication units. This paper identifies strengths inherent in communication units that will help university administrators understand the importance and contributions of Extension communicators. The paper also explores how to prepare a communication unit for inevitable change, especially if there will be one less chair at the table when the music stops.

What happens when a new university administration doesn't know what Extension does or why an Extension communication unit exists? Like the game of musical chairs, budget-cutting at the university level can mean having the "chair" pulled out from under units or programs whose value is not understood by cost-cutting administrators.

Communication unit leadership must increasingly rely on an entrepreneurial approach to position their units as essential to the success of Extension and the university. This paper explores how to prepare a communication unit for the inevitable day when the music stops and there is one less chair at the table.

Background

Much has been written about the importance of leadership supporting organizations through times of change. Deetz, Tracy, and Simpson (2000) traced back to 431 B.C. to explore the history of leadership and organizational change. In attempting to inspire his troops in their war against Sparta, Pericles focused on two winning arguments: Recognize what makes us different, and use those differences to win the battle. Those same arguments can be applied to communication units within land-grant universities—units that are essential to success in today's knowledge economy.

Professional Development

In the knowledge economy, wealth is created by generating and leveraging knowledge. In an exploration of industries that create and sell information and expert knowledge, Brandt (2005) associated the knowledge economy with processes of learning, communication, and social networking. These are the hallmarks of communication units within a land-grant university, whose mission is to leverage knowledge from research in order to make it available to more people and applicable to local concerns.

The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities reported in 1996 on the sometimes misunderstood role of agricultural research and Extension. The report, signed by administrators from the nation's top land-grant universities, called for land-grants to encourage learning, discovery, and engagement to help communities and states build a high-technology economy. The call was clear, but that was more than a decade ago.

Since then, according to Wood (2006), Extension communication units have faced increasing challenges from administrators, exacerbated by economic downturns in the 1990s and the economic consequences following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In recent years, administrators have responded to shrinking budgets by outsourcing communication services and emphasizing cost recovery in the production of educational materials. One result of such cost-cutting efforts is a blurring of roles between academic and service communication units. New administrators, particularly those from outside the land-grant system, may not understand the mission of Extension or the scope of Extension programs or audiences. As Wood emphasized, if Extension communication units do not clearly define their roles, they risk having their roles defined—and limited—by someone else, restricting choices and opportunities. In the process, universities lose a powerful engine in the knowledge economy.

Discussion

As universities respond to shrinking budgets and shifting priorities, several challenges face communication units. These units might be part of Extension, Agricultural Experiment Stations, or an individual college, and university administrators may not know what these units do, for whom, or why. As a result of this lack of understanding, several challenges arise.

Challenges

Subject to budget lust.

Not understanding Extension's budget structure, university administrators may see the Extension service as a competitor for scarce budget dollars and may seek to limit the substantial influence that Extension

staff and faculty have with state, county, and municipal decision-makers, undermining Extension's ability to leverage statewide support for the university as a whole.

Perceived as an anachronism.

With insufficient understanding of the scope of Extension programs, university administrators may dismiss the Extension service and agricultural research as programs whose appeal is limited to farm and rural audiences. This lack of understanding can confuse 21st century Extension and outreach with Depression-era vocational training that might seem to be irrelevant and even an embarrassment to today's university.

Dismissed as lacking academic value.

Administrators with little or no experience as communicators themselves may simply equate communication with desktop publishing technology and not recognize its strategic and academic value. Not understanding that research and analysis are part of an academic communication unit, administrators both within and outside of Extension may implement sweeping changes (replacing all traditional media with new media, for example) without testing audience response, ignoring research that shows that certain traditional strategies remain effective in reaching target audiences.

Dismissed as redundant.

During times of budget constraint, administrators may believe that efficiencies will be gained by combining units that seem to have similar duties and activities. They may not understand that dispersed effort does not mean duplicated effort. If they confuse Extension communications with public relations and marketing, administrators risk losing the production of public educational media that is the purview of Extension communication units and the currency of the knowledge economy.

Strengths

Communication is an organization's most valuable commodity during times of change. Extension communication units have inherent strengths that can help their universities rapidly adjust to increasing demands to do more for less. Communication units leverage those strengths during times of change.

Quick response.

Extension communicators know how to respond to short deadlines and to provide essential information when it is needed. Indeed, communication is critical during times of change in order to keep individuals across the organization informed and engaged and to articulate new directions.

Professional Development

Statewide engagement.

Extension is an established system for statewide engagement—an important concept to most administrators. Extension communicators can demonstrate how the university administration may take advantage of this statewide presence by enlisting their role as listeners within communities and delivering local messages to the central administration. In addition, Extension communicators can help university departments find new ways to connect and engage with communities beyond campus.

Contributions to the knowledge economy.

Extension communicators increase the understanding of publicly funded science by translating research findings into meaningful educational materials for the public. They connect the university's message with local stories of accomplishment at the state and county level.

Potential to leverage support for entire university.

Extension enjoys considerable influence among state, county, and municipal decision-makers who understand and value Extension programs and services. This statewide network of supporters can be a significant resource in leveraging support for the entire land-grant university. In addition, Extension brings resources such as federal Smith-Lever dollars and county matching funds that come to the university specifically and exclusively for Extension work—resources that would be lost if the programs were eliminated.

A wealth of educational materials.

Extension communication units have archives of information, publications, educational material, and published stories. With some creative sorting, packets of information can be compiled to address critical topics as quickly as they emerge. Communicators can provide administrators with educational materials at a moment's notice and respond quickly to requests to help new administrators develop essential knowledge about the university.

Ability to facilitate student recruitment.

The Extension service functions as a front door to the university in each county across the state. The university can use this door to welcome potential students in communities where Extension is known and trusted and where university administration may not have well-developed relationships.

Added value from the professional network.

Communicators are well-equipped to precisely articulate a problem and to facilitate finding a solution. Drawing on the experience of colleagues within professional organizations such as ACE, Extension communicators

have a knowledgeable community in which to solicit advice and test ideas. Such professional partners provide the potential to exponentially increase the power of strategic communications for the Extension service and the university.

Examples

For many ACE communicators, one of the first notes of impending change was sounded in a 1991 *Signals* article, "Budget Ax Falls in Georgia." The article detailed the loss of 29 out of 40 communications positions at the University of Georgia (Rodekohr, 1991). Undoubtedly, many ACE professionals thought at the time, "That won't happen here . . . or will it?" As the ax fell at other universities—and administrators with inadequate budgets scrutinized how best to satisfy the needs of faculty, programs, and academic departments—the question for many ACE professionals became, "When will it happen here?"

In the mid 1990s, in preparation for an inevitable challenge, the communication unit of the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) began to systematically define the characteristics of their products, services, and programs in order to present a clearer picture of their contributions to their administration. They compared their costs and benefits to commercial costs and quality, calculating salary rates plus benefits for all productive hours, the total cost of materials, and operating expenses, including maintenance support for buildings and depreciation on all large items. They compared these in-house cost figures with low to average figures quoted by commercial sector experts found in larger regional metropolitan markets. The difference was astounding. In-house communications saved \$2 million to \$3 million for each year of the analysis. To add credibility to the study, economics faculty and a vice president of a larger commercial public relations firm reviewed the analysis and endorsed the results. These findings were difficult for administrators to ignore.

The IFAS communication unit continues to strengthen its position. Utilizing an annual communications plan with an anticipated budget, becoming an entrepreneur with a cost recovery system in place, partnering and sharing resources with other programs and faculty, working to communicate agricultural industry achievements, and working with other campus communications offices through the University of Florida Communications Network have all led to a firmer "position" for the unit when issues arise.

No one can predict the issues that might surface with the next senior executive or dean, but communicators must anticipate questions and be ready to prove their worth. This is especially important when administrative

Professional Development

change seems to be perpetual. For example, the University of Idaho has had four presidents during the past five years, and has seen rapid turnover in several upper-level administrator positions. During these transitions, the agricultural communication unit became a conspicuous target in efforts to streamline operations and reduce duplication.

One strategy to differentiate this unit from the central communication unit was to change the department's name to Educational Communications. The former name, Agricultural Communications, signified the distinct subject orientation of the communication work, but the new name more accurately described the primary mission and clearly conveyed the unit's educational role as distinct from the central communication department's emphases of advancement, marketing, and public relations.

Implications

University administrators may not know what Extension communicators do and what additional value they bring to the university as communicators and educators. That is why it is essential for Extension communicators to be clear—among themselves, within Extension, and within the larger university administration—about their purpose and value. Taking an entrepreneurial approach can help position a communication unit to survive—or thrive—during times of inevitable change.

Use the expertise of academic faculty to articulate a clear educational purpose for communication products, services, and programs. Identify partners among faculty, government agencies, industry, and individuals. Identify customers, including administrators who use Extension communications to benefit the university. Demonstrate that communications are essential in extending and applying research.

And remember that nothing stays fixed for long. Change is inevitable and unpredictable. The average tenure for a public university president is about six years (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, n.d.), and each new legislative season refocuses political interest on new issues and priorities. Communication is essential during times of change, and communication units can help an organization evaluate and adapt to a shifting landscape.

Conclusions

1. Clearly define the value of your products, services, and programs.
2. Know your internal and external customers for these products and services.

3. Be clear about Extension's educational mission and make it known that Extension communication is much more than public relations and marketing.
4. Respond quickly to provide useful materials to new administrators.
5. Equate outreach with engagement.
6. Keep a strong base of support on campus and across the state.
7. Reach out for consultation from colleagues in other states.

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Keywords

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Professional Development

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