

## **Pondering Theory within Extension and Community Education: An Exploration of New Frontiers and Frameworks**

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A century after its humble beginnings, Cooperative Extension endures as a strong foundation for rural communities within the United States, as well as a unique model for community education globally. At its origin, Cooperative Extension was a highly innovative model that changed the educational landscape for many Americans. Its purpose, to translate cutting edge research from the land-grant university to rural communities across each state by providing evidence-based education. Still, as we progress over a century later, some would argue that if Extension doesn't evolve and transform, it could become irrelevant (Bull et al. 2004; Fox, 2024; Ruemenapp, 2017).

To be clear, the demand for community education and university extension is as all-encompassing today as it was historically. However, as communities have evolved, we must ask, *“Do the traditional areas of 4-H, Agriculture & Natural Resources, Family Consumer Science, and Horticulture address a majority of societal needs?”* *“Should Extension expand to include expertise from other colleges within land-grant universities?”* or *“Should it focus solely on what has been tried and true historically from colleges of agriculture?”* The answers to these foundational questions pose further inquiry – *“Does innovation within Extension equate to casting tradition aside?”* *“If not, then how do we innovate within Extension to respect tradition, but also continue to be cutting edge?”* and finally, *“If we can continue to push innovation in community education, what do innovative conceptual and theoretical models look like and how are they applied?”*

We have taken these questions into great consideration and after years of contemplation, development and application, we propose five novel academic frameworks that, while respecting the traditions of Extension, assist in explaining international extension and education processes within the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. However, to provide a deeper perspective, we must first examine the roots of the United States Cooperative Extension Service in its historic context.

### **Historic Context**

It's April 1819. The United States is just over 40 years old and is in the middle of experiencing the Panic of 1819 – the first financial crisis ever to occur in the newly developed country. James Monroe is president, and Thomas Jefferson has founded the University of Virginia. The United States is still being shaped, as Spain cedes (the geographic region that becomes) Florida to the US through the

Adams-Onis Treaty. What's more, and perhaps more salient to this audience, John Stuart Skinner begins publishing the first agricultural journal in the United States, titled *The American Farmer*. This publication was created to provide novel and accurate information about innovative agricultural technologies, animal husbandry and farm commodity prices, to help reinvigorate agriculture after it hit rock bottom during the War of 1812 (Pinkett, 1950). This pioneering journal was particularly innovative for its day, as it not only reported on new and groundbreaking agricultural techniques, but also encouraged local farmers to report on their achievements and unique methods of solving agricultural problems (USDA, n.d.).

Many would argue this was the conceptual beginnings of Extension within the United States. While the Cooperative Extension System wasn't formally established until 1914 through the Smith-Lever Act, more informal community education programs such as agricultural clubs and societies go back as far back as the early 1800s (USDA, n.d.). Furthermore, education for the common man was being established in the United States; through the Morrill Act of 1862, each state was given land in order finance the creation of one or more schools to teach "agriculture and the mechanic arts" (Songe, 1962). It was through this legislation that the U.S. sought to meet a rapidly industrializing nation's need for scientifically trained agriculturalists. It was also through the establishment of these institutions where the land-grant university's tripartite mission of research, teaching and outreach (or extending knowledge to local communities) began to be realized.

At the same time, agricultural production was progressing rapidly worldwide. By the mid- to late- 1800's, mechanized farming was trending internationally. Steam traction engines (the world's earliest tractors) invented in 1859 by Englishman Thomas Aveling, and agricultural machines powered by the first modern internal combustion engines (invented in 1876 by German engineer Nikolaus Otto) were all steadfastly shifting the global agricultural scene. With the rapid evolution of agriculture in all its different variants, the need for effective agricultural and community education became imminent.

### ***Smith-Lever Act of 1914***

Organized community education, to be conceptualized "the extension of the land-grant system" was introduced in the United States through the Smith-Lever Act of 1914. The Smith-Lever Act created a national Cooperative Extension Service that expanded outreach programs through land-grant universities with the express purpose of educating rural Americans about innovations in agricultural practices. This also established a longitudinal partnership between the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and each state's land-grant university to apply research and provide agricultural education (USDA, n.d.). Of contextual importance is that during 1914, more than 50 percent of the U.S. population lived in rural areas, and 30 percent of the workforce was engaged in farming. Extension's

engagement with rural America helped make possible the American agricultural revolution, which dramatically increased farm productivity, allowing fewer farmers to produce more food. These advances helped increase American agricultural productivity dramatically throughout the rest of the 20th century and by association, also improved the quality of life of rural communities.

That brings us to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and the impetus for this article. Why is it important to examine and propose new theories, models and frameworks within the field of extension and community education in 2025? While there has been a lot of positive impact through extension throughout history, modern society continues to change and evolve. It is important that community education evolves with it; therefore, it is imperative that we continue to look for new ways to effectively engage and educate our global audiences utilizing extension as the source.

### **Innovative Frameworks**

As we look to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we propose five novel academic frameworks that, while still respecting the traditions of Extension, assist in explaining international extension and education processes within contemporary society. While the foundations of these frameworks are quite complex, we have summarized them and, for the purpose of this article, applied them within a contemporary international setting. Finally, it is important to note, that while each of these frameworks and models are distinct, they may also be utilized to support one another when applied within extension and community education.

### ***Case Study Application: Extensionista***

Within extension and community education, it is often helpful to use a common example or case in which theoretical concepts and frameworks can be applied. This assists in providing a contextual basis for theoretical application. Therefore, throughout our discussion, we will focus on the international village of *Extensionista* – a small urban community nestled among rolling hills and agricultural land, serving as an anchor for urban and rural development (see Table 1). *Extensionista* is a thriving and diverse community seeking to expand its agrarian products and commodities.

*Extensionista* community members speak a variety of languages with 65% English speaking, 20% Spanish speaking & 15% other languages including Mandarin, Tagalog and Arabic. A majority of the population (75%) is between the ages of 18-64, with 15% under the age of 17 and 10% over the age of 65.

### **Table 1**

*Extensionista's Demographics, 2024*

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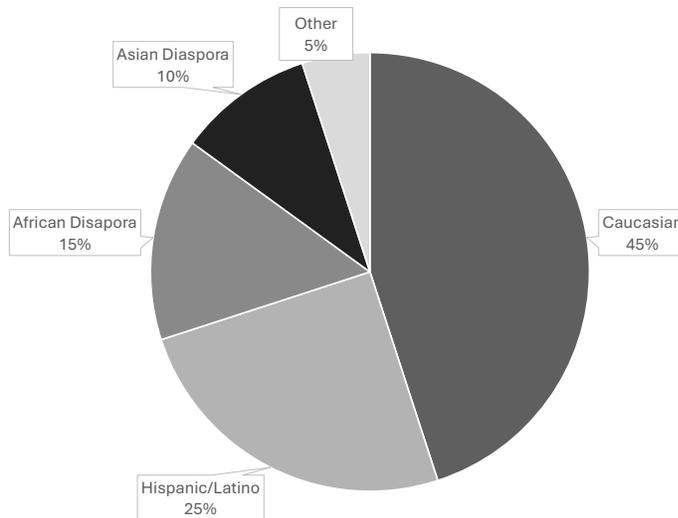
Population	51,500
Area	24.14 km <sup>2</sup> / 9.32 miles <sup>2</sup>
Gender	Males: 25,375
	Females: 26,125

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The community also demonstrates spiritual diversity, with 35% of its population identifying as Christian, 25% claim no religious affiliation, 10% Buddhist, 15% Muslim, and 10% Hindu and 5% other. Finally, the community is also ethnically varied, with the largest percentage identifying as White Caucasian (45%), followed by 25% Hispanic/Latino, 15% identifying with African Diaspora, 10% Asian Diaspora and 5% other (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Extensionista's Ethnic Demographics, 2024*



***Framework 1: Emotional-Behavioral Influence Model***

We begin with an emotional/cognitive model that articulates one's experience when engaging in both personal and professional settings. As a global discipline, it is important to focus on individual experiences as their interactions weigh heavily on job satisfaction, work-life balance and professional longevity (Asadi et al., 2008; Hains & Knobloch, 2013; Harder et al., 2014; Windon, 2019). In fact, a model that illuminates the internal emotional and cognitive processes an individual experiences daily could not only inform strategies associated with work-life balance but could also enlighten us about professional leadership approaches and cultural climates.

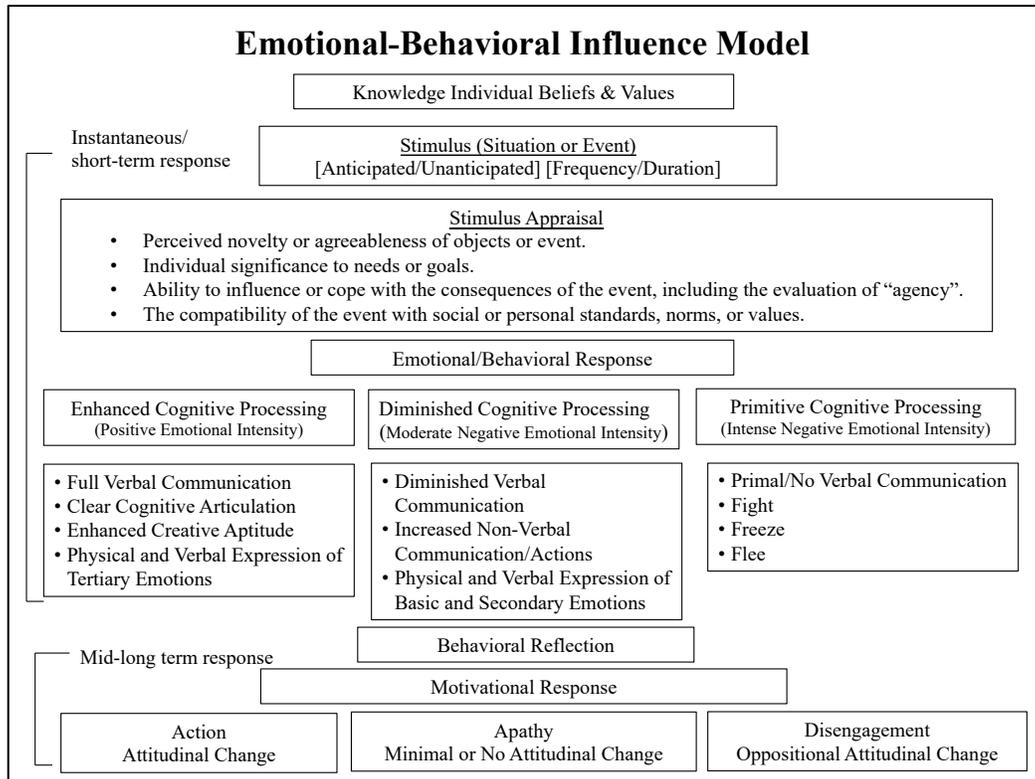
To assist us in better understanding individual experiences in community extension and education, we pose the *emotional-behavioral influence model* (Hains & Hains, 2020) (see Figure 2) as one novel framework for international extension and community education. In development since 2013 (Hains & Knobloch, 2013), this comprehensive framework is comprised of three foundational theories including *appraisal theory* (Scherer & Moors, 2019), *downshifting* (Hains, 2007; Hart, 1983), and *flow theory* (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001). This pragmatic model (see Figure 2) integrates these theories to explain both emotional and behavioral processes as professionals engage their professional setting and local communities.

The emotional-behavioral influence model (EBI) can best be explained using a professional example. Catrina is a new professional entering international extension and education. After receiving a degree in agriculture from her home university, she was hired into a hybrid (governmental/university) position funded the Extensionista government and Universidad de la Academia or U.A. to assist in expanding the community's agrarian products and commodities. However, to do so, Catrina must move far away from her hometown into the community of Extensionista.

Growing up in a rural area, where most of the community has similar experiences and culture, Catrina enters her extension position with a set of firm personal *beliefs and values* derived from her prior experiences. During Catrina's first couple of months, she is exposed to several novel stimuli, *objects or events*, such as new office personnel, new cultural and social environments (Extensionista is a diverse community), and new professional expectations. Furthermore, she is able to meet key agricultural stakeholders throughout the community, with mixed pleasantries. Some greet her with open arms and bring food as welcoming gifts, others are much more reserved even giving signs of discontent with the new hire.

## Figure 2

## Emotional-Behavioral Influence Model



Catrina evaluates or *appraises* each stimulus using four factors; (1) her perceived novelty or agreeableness of the object(s) or event(s); (2) individual significance to her needs or personal goals; (3) evaluation of the event in regards to social and personal norms, standards, or values; (4) her ability to influence or cope with the consequences of the event, including her ability to evaluate whether or not she is able to act in response to the event (Scherer & Moors, 2019). As you can imagine, this new professional environment creates a plethora of emotions as she negotiates her personal norms and values with those of her new community, including the diverse personalities and customs of the residents.

Her continuous *appraisal* triggers emotions along a continuum ranging from positive - negative. Evoked emotions are dependent upon Catrina interpreting the stimulus as either supporting or in threatening her established beliefs and experiences. If the stimulus is deemed positive and non-threatening, more positive emotions are evoked. If she perceives the experience to be threatening and negative, more negative emotions are evoked. Throughout her engagement Catrina

experiences events which she deems both positive and some to be rather threatening to her own norms. Correspondingly, her behavior is directly affected.

Within the EBI, cognition and behavior can be affected equally by positive and negative emotions. Catrina's immediate stimulus appraisal governs the magnitude of her emotions, influencing her cognitive abilities in three ways (1) emotions enhance cognitive ability leading to *optimal cognitive processing*, articulation and socialization; (2) *emotions limit cognitive processing*, diminishing verbal and written communicative abilities; increasing non-verbal signs of secondary emotions (ie. surprise, joy, nervousness); (3) *emotions dictate cognition*, exhibiting behaviors such as freeze, flight and flee.

Returning to Catrina, we find that by assuming her professional position she experienced several new stimuli. Throughout her interactions she evaluated/*appraised* each stimulus in relation to her personal norms and values. As a result, emotions were evoked matching her perceived magnitude of the stimulus or event. This led to behaviors described within the three *short-term emotional/biobehavioral* categories.

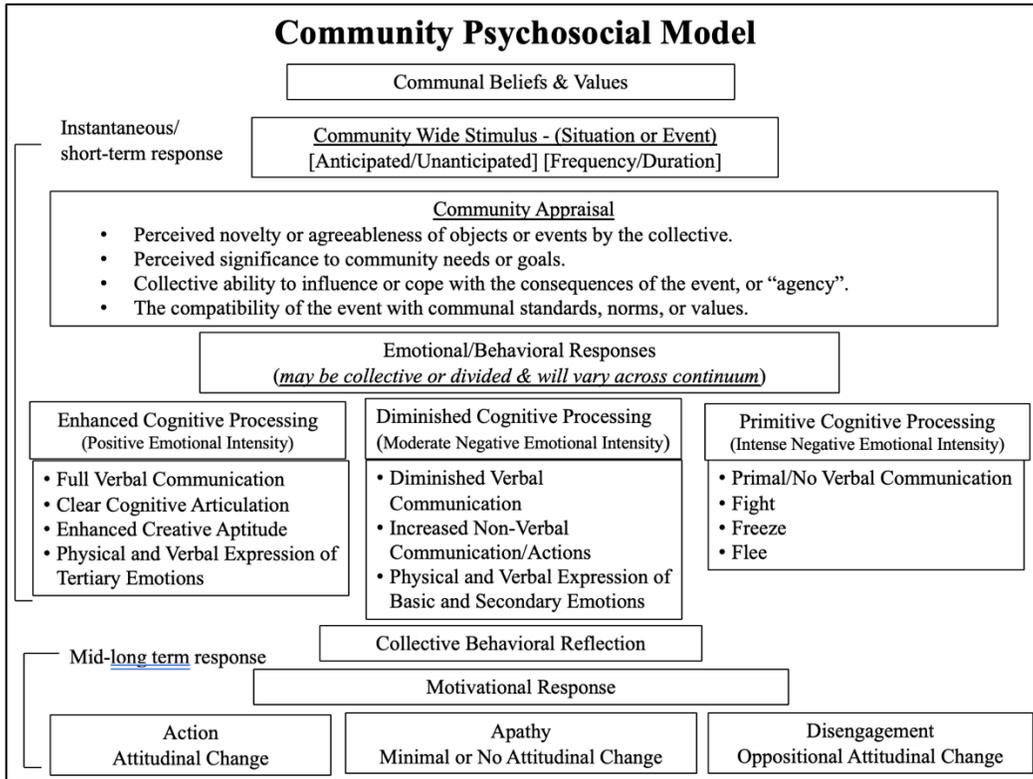
Once Catrina had experienced and reacted to the stimulus/event, she reflected on her situation and emotional response. This *mid to long term reflection* is critical as it allows Catrina the opportunity to re-appraise her experience. Her analysis then either supports or challenges her initial reaction and provides a catalyst for motivation and/or attitudinal change or lack thereof directly influencing her perspective toward her professional choice, job satisfaction and career longevity.

### ***Framework Two: Community Psychosocial Model***

With minor adaptation, the EBI model can transition from individual experience to a communal response to new stimuli (Hains & Hains, 2020). Therefore, we present the *community psychosocial model* (CSM). The distinctions between the EBI model and the CSM are minimal but important - having much more to do with scope. For instance, the EBI primarily focuses on the individual and their lived experiences, perceptions and reactions. However, the CSM model transcends the primary constructs to the broader community. Thus, you may see behavioral and emotional divergence toward community stimuli from different social and professional subsets of a community, rather than a linear response from an individual. The ability for extension professionals to identify these key reactions toward novel community stimuli enhance their ability to predict, adapt and guide the community toward a common goal or objective.

**Figure 3**

*Community Psychosocial Model*



To highlight how the model translates into larger community behaviors we return to our community of Extensionista. Recently, the global agricultural company, *Jardin*, has expressed interest in establishing a large multi-greenhouse seedling operation due to the community’s reduced tax laws. Holistically, this would provide an economic boom and substantially expand their agrarian products and commodities, which is a primary goal of the community. However, it would also be in direct competition with some of the local producers. As such, producers have mixed reviews regarding *Jardin*’s integration into the community. Extensionista’s agricultural stakeholders’ response to this new stimulus (*Jardin*) can be articulated using the community psychosocial model (Refer to Figure 3 above.).

While Extensionista exhibits solidarity among its residents with communal social norms and values, it is still a diverse community with distinct cultural differentiations. Therefore, it is not a homogenous municipality. While there is respect and tolerance for diverse ideas and cultures, they are not unanimous. This

is also true with the agrarian community of practice, or those professionally associated with agricultural production and sales. For instance, producers who are not in direct competition with Jardin's produce believe their integration into the community is a benefit and will expedite the community's goals to enhance agrarian production and commodities. However, those in direct competition could be put out of business due to Jardin's resources. Therefore, the community's appraisal of the stimuli (Jardin's integration) is mixed.

Those that are not in direct competition could reach higher cognitive states and be motivated to support such communal change. While those in direct competition may emotionally "downshift" and exhibit "fight or flight" behaviors toward Jardin's integration into the community. This disparate community response can divide community initiatives and either nullify initiatives or create division and resentment among the agrarian community of practice. In contrast, if there is limited or no competition, it can lead to a positive response it can lead to immediate integration of Jardin. Finally, if there is a majority competition, it can cause the business initiative to fail completely.

### ***Framework Three: Symbiotic Model of Community Reciprocity***

As Catrina has settled into her extension position, she has become adamantly aware that her agrarian stakeholders and those she serves are divided regarding their perceptions of Jardin entering Extensionista. As a servant leader, she must work with her stakeholders to better understand whether Jardin is a benefit or risk to the community. She then references the *symbiotic model of community reciprocity* (see Figure 4), using the model as a platform for community discussion. The model adapted from Hains and Hains (2023) and Johnson et al. (2019) borrows from the symbiotic biological model and applies the three relational categories of parasitism, mutualism, and commensalism within communities.

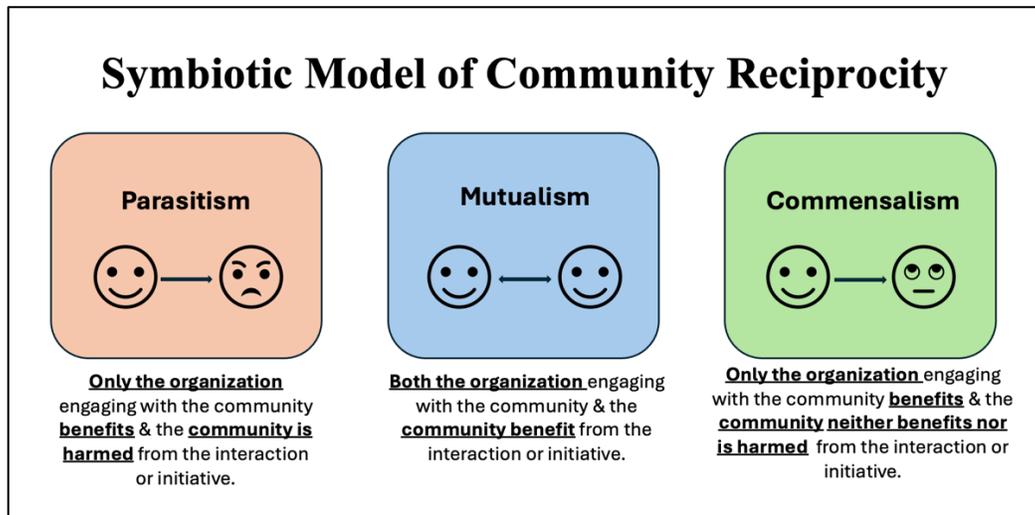
Many community stakeholders feared that Jardin would displace several of the local producers due to its extensive resources, creating a *parasitic* relationship with the community as only Jardin would benefit from entering the community and it would ultimately push out long time local producers.

Fully understanding the guarded perspectives of her agricultural community, Catrina began to hold community listening sessions and even invited Jardin executives to meet with local producers to discuss their business plan and community influence. Many in attendance expected the impact to be *parasitic* in nature or at best *commensal*, meaning that Jardin would benefit but the producers would neither be eliminated or benefit from their efforts. However, they were delighted when, through public negotiations, Jardin agreed to integrate local producer's products into their sales and marketing, highlighting them as locally grown. They even established a premium for local producers who met their

professional standards with the produce. What's more, Jardin would provide the community over 200 new employment opportunities within the agricultural sector.

**Figure 4**

*Symbiotic Model of Community Reciprocity*



These negotiations and contracts provided a mutualistic relationship for both Jardin and Extensionista. Not only did Jardin increase their production capacity by including local producers and marketing it as locally grown, but local producers received a premium for their produce and the community gained 200 new jobs. Catrina and all involved viewed it as a win-win situation.

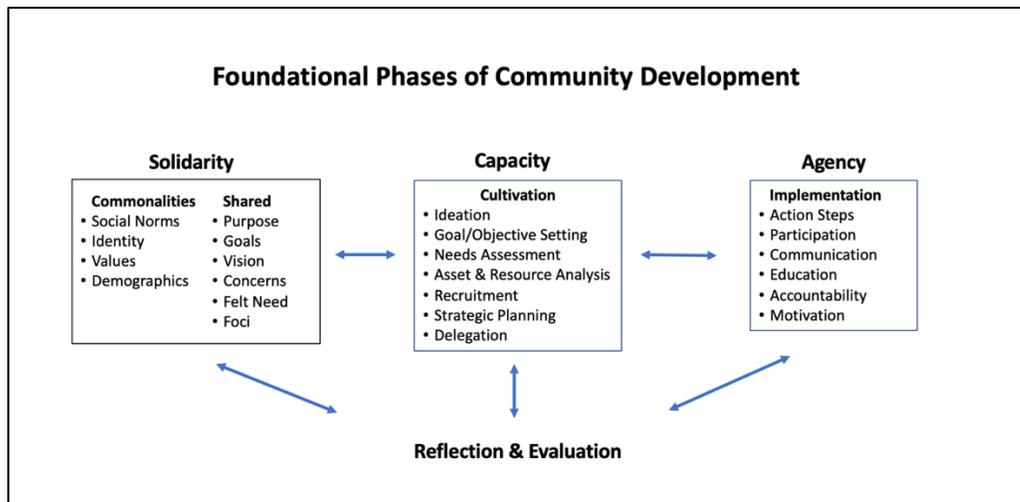
***Framework Four: Foundational Phases for Community Development***

Thanks to Catrina's leadership, the agricultural community and Jardin were mutually in agreement with meeting Extensionista's goals of expanding its agrarian products and commodities. However, while beginning discussions were positive, much work was still needed to effectively meet the extensive goals. Catrina was formally trained in the agricultural sciences. She fully understood the growth patterns and practices associated with agronomy and horticulture as well as animal husbandry and animal science. While this training was adequate for technical expertise, it left her feeling inadequate regarding her ability to pull communities together and lead them to their professional and economic goals, which she was hired to do as an extension and community educator. In desperation, she reached out to the local university and found resources highlighting strategies for community development and change. It was here that she became aware of the

*foundational phases for community development* (see Figure 5). Grant and Hains (2023) expanded Bhattacharyya’s (2004) theory of community development to include three inter-related phases: solidarity, capacity, and agency.

**Figure 5**

*Foundational Phases of Community Development*



*Note.* Adapted from Grant & Hains (2023) Foundational Phases of Community Development

Catrina knew that historically the agricultural community were fairly cohesive in Extensionista. However, there were still strong personalities and competitive hurdles that were needed to be navigated to achieve the broader community goals. Consequently, she worked diligently to strengthen stakeholder *solidarity*, or unity toward an identity or goal - focusing on shared purpose, goals and visions. She believed if everyone could see the “bigger picture” then the personalities and competitive squabbles could be navigated or worked through. Therefore, she initiated a community-wide strategic plan inclusive of the entire community but specifically for her agricultural stakeholders including Jardin leadership.

During the strategic planning process, stakeholders began to realize that they had most of the assets needed to complete their goals to expand their agricultural products and commodities. They had the land, facilities, equipment and labor to move ahead. However, they were lacking expertise in legal, marketing, etm. within the community, diminishing their *capacity*, or collective competence, to effectively meet their goals. Through Catrina’s leadership they quickly realized that they could contract experts from the local university on an as needed basis rather than hiring individual experts full time. This assisted them in moving forward

and allowed them the *agency*, or ability to take direct action, to increase their agricultural products and commodities because they were able to secure new markets within the country, ultimately achieving their longitudinal goals.

***Framework Five: Model of Urban Extension***

Throughout the next several years Catrina continued to see community successes within the agricultural community. As with all situations, there were moments of great achievement and substantial difficulty and frustration as the community's needs shifted. In fact, the Extensionista government honored Catrina and the community with several awards for their excellent growth and achievements. However, as the community at large grew, they began to identify new needs, many of which were not related to agriculture, which Catrina seemed to have a good grasp of.

To meet the growing requirements of their community, Extensionista officials decided they needed to hire a new type of community professional. One that was not necessarily a technical professional steeped in knowledge and skills of a particular context such as agriculture, business or public health, but someone who could lead, educate and engage the community regardless of professional context. They wanted a professional who could assist in identifying community issues and initiatives and then convene expertise and resources surrounding that cause. This individual could reach out to key stakeholders and build solidarity, capacity and agency for multiple initiatives much like Catrina did for the agricultural stakeholders. The need for a professional who focuses on community processes rather than scientific contexts created a new demand for the urban extension professional.

Different from rural communities where there are limited resources community wide, urban communities such as Extensionista have lots of disparate resources that may or may not interact and engage toward a common goal or initiative. Therefore, leadership is needed to convene these resources, organizations and expertise and create capacity to collectively address community problems and/or initiatives. A professional of this nature could assist the community in enhancing its well-being and individual quality of life for all residents rather than providing expertise in one sector of the community. However, to effectively support and train professionals to meet these new demands a framework was developed to guide the holistic development. Therefore, we propose the *model of urban extension* (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6**

*Model of Urban Extension*



*Note.* Adapted from Hains, Hains, Young & Fugate (2023)

The purpose of this four-quadrant model is to provide a new type of extension professional. One that can adapt to diverse community needs and initiatives while focusing on community leadership and education processes. The first quadrant includes using skills associated with community engaged research to collectively identify needs, challenges and solutions associated with evolving community requirements. A second quadrant highlights knowledge and skills associated with effective community engagement including, but not limited to, professional communication and outreach, educational design and implementation, and cultural intelligence. Extensionista officials and community experts from the Universidad de la Academia should provide continuous professional development opportunities for the new urban extension professionals, updating them on the newest strategies and skills associated with community engagement, education and development. Finally, because it is a novel and evolving profession, all stakeholders should assist in advocating for this new type of professional position. One that has holistic community impact by focusing on community processes among diverse community contexts.

## Conclusions & Professional Implications

Just to be clear, the concepts of extension and community education continue to play an important role within today's education landscape. However, it is also understood while many of extension's tried and true conceptual frameworks prove useful in today's communities, the field also needs to evolve to meet unique contemporary societal needs. This is true both around the world, as well as in the United States. And while many of the programs and activities undertaken by extension over the last 100+ years are still applicable, there are also numerous situations in which new approaches should be considered, to remain necessary and relevant to today's constituency.

Within this manuscript, we proposed five novel frameworks focusing on the nexus of extension professional-community engagement and the complex social dynamics associated with their daily interactions. Each of these frameworks address, in different ways, the ever-changing issues and intricacies of today's society. Furthermore, we challenge traditional models of the extension professional being an agricultural technical expert to that of social convener and community leader within both rural and urban contexts. The technical expertise model may work for your extension community – and it may not. Allowing for other structures (i.e. social convening or coalition building) or referencing novel models (i.e. foundational phases of community development or the model of urban extension) encourages innovation and supports successful change – which can lead to more effectiveness, engagement and ultimately relevancy. In all these situations, you will never know the possibilities if you never consider alternative structures or models.

So, this brings us back to our initial questions: “*Do the traditional areas of 4-H, Agriculture & Natural Resources, Family Consumer Science, and Horticulture address a majority of societal needs?*” or perhaps “*Should Extension expand to include expertise from other colleges within land-grant universities?*” or even “*Should it focus solely on what has been tried and true historically from colleges of agriculture?*” It is true the discussion posed throughout this manuscript does not answer these questions directly. However, it does give a platform from which to consider, and answer, these questions as appropriate for your own situation or organization. It allows the conversation to be had – and this is one step ahead of most of us currently employed within extension situations around the world. Often, we are so concerned with *the work* that we don't take the time to discuss the processes behind the work, how they are structured, or even the effectiveness of the overall situation. In addition, in many cases we are so concerned with preserving tradition that we forget we can innovate while continuing to honor tradition. Proposing, considering, and applying novel models to the field encourages deeper discussions, and offers alternative models to utilize in order to innovate. These innovative frameworks are intended to augment and

challenge the landscape of extension, both domestically and globally, into a more relevant future.

A century after its humble beginnings, Cooperative Extension endures as a strong foundation for rural communities within the United States, as well as a unique model for community education globally. It's up to us to continue the tradition of innovation, creativity and education for all. Accordingly, we challenge scholars, practitioners, and community leaders alike to test, critique and add to these models, individually and collectively, as it is through our collective knowledge and application that we further strengthen extension and community education and maintain its relevance and innovative nature well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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