

Outreach Shaped by External Constituencies

Higher education in the United States has a number of legitimate agendas, many covenants regarding its role in helping society. The mission of a land-grant institution, in this case Michigan State University, requires that its agendas and roles be shaped by an external focus on constituent needs and demands. Ray Vlasin, MSU professor of resource development and Extension specialist for economic development, believes five macro trends are influencing the outreach agenda today.

■ **Responsiveness to clients.** The “customer first” orientation is pervasive in business, industry, and government. In the design of outreach programs, universities have to be more in tune with the needs, preferences, requirements, and opportunities of clients and respond efficiently.

■ **Quality products, quality service, and quality assurance.** There is a pervasive trend toward continuous improvement of products and services in both the private and public sectors. The drive for quality necessitates depth in knowledge and assistance provided, and greater stress on outcomes.

■ **Partnering.** There has been a universal discovery of the benefits of partnering. Partners must be clear about their “capabilities” and “capacity to deliver.”

■ **Elimination of duplication.** Increasingly, organizations must be aware of what others are doing and are capable of doing, and reduce unproductive duplication of products and services.

■ **Distrust of government as long-term service providers.** Federal and state programs must last beyond one administration. For long-term sustainability, higher education and outreach must look at organizational arrangements and institutional structures that go beyond leadership by a state or federal agency. We must recognize also that disengaging from these agencies may mean losing funding.

One response is to design educational constituent-based programs. In this model, the constituent and the knowledge providers are both active partners, both seeking effective and efficient responses to the client’s needs. Constituent-based programs are not cafeteria-type programs, where clients come in and help themselves. Rather, these programs presuppose an identified constituency that has some common reasons for being together and for working with the educational partner. Possible types of constituents might include a common set of businesses, recently elected officials, rural retailers, or new entrepreneurs, for example.

The benefits of constituent-based educational programs include the following:

1. If constituents work together, they can be individually small but act large, remain individual but act collectively.

Contact:

**Raymond Vlasin
Professor and
Extension Specialist,
Resource Development,
Michigan State
University**

**Room 6 Kellogg Center
East Lansing, MI 48824**

Phone: 517/355-0232

Fax: 517/353-9896

E-mail:

22331RDV@msu.edu

Presenters:

**Michigan State
University**

Fred Poston, Vice Provost
and Dean, Agriculture
and Natural Resources

**Butterworth Health
System**

C.E. Pippenger, Director,
Cook Institute for
Research and Education

2. The constituents and the providers can achieve greater scale approaches, allowing them to aggregate their assets and accumulate some resources — achieve objectives together that they cannot achieve by acting alone.
3. It provides a framework within which one client can help another. Social capital is built as clients develop trust and recognition of one another's needs.
4. Capacity building takes place. Providers and clients can find simpler ways of working together.
5. They also can undertake “leadership development” and “organization development.” Organization and leadership development can, in turn, provide easier access to resources.
6. Sustainability is enhanced because of a stronger base of support and clients believe that they will receive a quality set of directly relevant programs.

Principles in Working with Constituencies

Fred Poston, MSU vice provost and dean of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, indicated that much has been written on the agricultural model of extension, some of which is confusing and misleading. What is needed is to think of a set of principles that can be applied to various constituencies or groups.

1. Access: The constituent's access to the university and the university's access to the constituent is the most basic principle. An old saying is that “Societies have problems and universities have departments.” Constituents are frequently frustrated in their attempts to find the right expertise in a complex university structure of units and administrative activities. Access and linkage to the right expertise is crucial and basic.
2. Trust: Mutual trust depends on the integrity of both parties, helping to build on success and mitigate the impact of mistakes when there are failures. Without integrity, outreach programs are not sustainable.
3. Constituent involvement: Constituent involvement in the planning, execution, and evaluation of the program helps build ownership by the constituency for the program, harnesses the best thinking of the group, and greatly speeds implementation. Evaluation of results together educates all participants.
4. Infrastructure: When building an infrastructure with a constituency, the university must learn to lead from the back, using principles and practices of leadership development and organizational development. Leadership and activism must be fostered in the constituent group. Constituents learn leadership by doing.

5. Follow through: The consultant/expert who “blows in, blows off, and blows out” does not produce change. The need is for dedicated, sustained delivery in order to be able to institute change. Program adjustments are made over time, not in the short term. And evaluation must be based on the outcomes and the long-term results, not the traditional extension criterion of “how hard did you work.” Impact on people – qualitative and quantitative – is the only valid measure.

6. Program, not activity: A program is a set of educational activities along with infrastructure development designed to move a group of people from where they are to where they want to be or need to be. Creating the activities may or may not be part of the program, a difficult notion for new outreach professionals to grasp. Professionals may receive positive feedback for conducting activities that have been in place for a long time, but may not be fostering the development of new programs with specific outcomes now required. Scholarship in outreach is often reflected in the design – a blend of programs and directly related activities.

7. Faculty responsiveness to constituent needs: Constituent-based education requires a greater sensitivity to constituent needs than faculty would anticipate. This is especially crucial as university outreach programs have expanded across the board. In the name of intellectual curiosity, faculty tend to do what they want to do and resent shifting to providing repetitive educational assistance to meet specific constituent needs. Faculty outreach must be recognized and rewarded for programs responsive to constituent needs. One method is to require that units do outreach as part of their missions and that they publicly reward their faculty accordingly. Fundamental to all of this is the status of the professional in the academic unit that’s doing it.

8. Long-term programs require long-term funding: While soft dollars have a place, sustained programming requires long-term commitment of funding. Soft dollars are good for initiating new programs but, once created, how do you sustain them? This question must be answered in the beginning, not later. If one begins to supply a service for free, one cannot later get constituents to pay for it.

9. Faculty member as analyst, not activist: An activist educator promotes change because of his or her own desire for a particular outcome. An analyst educator promotes change by analyzing the situation and getting the constituent to analyze the situation. Faculty should be analyst educators in the community, not activists. They should build the constituents’ capacity for analysis.

10. Prevent faculty from “going native”: A professional can lose objectivity and take the side of the constituency, a common occurrence in the agricultural sector. The role of outreach is to get groups to assess situations for themselves by providing them information and facts, not to tell them what to think or do. The faculty member should be a facilitator,

not a direct participant in or advocate of the constituents' actions; and the developer of leaders, not the leader.

11. Constituents' need for issues: Constituents must have an issue or a challenge. The issue can be a funding initiative or prevention of a budget cut, a change in public policy or a law, for example. A constituency without an issue disintegrates. At the same time, constituent-based education is always a danger to a university's reputation and image of unbiased neutrality. Without that image, something significant is lost. Constituents need an unbiased, neutral group to evaluate their plans and outcomes.

12. A complete provider: The outreach provider must be able to serve the constituency comprehensively, dealing with matters both large and small. Attention must be paid to both short-term tactical matters and long-run strategic decisions. You have to do the "mundane" so you have the opportunity to do the "cutting edge." Often, the provider must help delineate the constituency, create a sense of the group, identify needs, and build trust.

A Constituent's Voice

C.E. Pippenger is director of the Cook Institute for Research and Education, Butterworth Health System in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He said he represents the silent constituent who needs the help of a university but doesn't know how to appropriately and effectively access it. When he first began to work with Butterworth, their innovative employee *HealthPlus* benefits program needed assessment. He suggested talking to MSU and the Butterworth staff responded by saying that MSU "ignores us, takes forever, and thinks they're the smart one." Staff also believed that nothing would be accomplished. He contacted the MSU outreach program with an opportunity to partner together and set a sixty-day limit. It was done in sixty days.

In the discussion that followed, an audience member wondered, after having built up a constituent base and established trust, how can one disinvest in a constituency when change is required. Disinvestment is an art, not a science. For example, state and federal governments are now less likely to subsidize some aspects of agriculture, and university outreach programs have to shift some activities to pay-as-you-go. This requires a delicate discussion. Going into every program from the beginning knowing that one will disinvest is best, but a short-term focus is not good for building trust. Constituents have to feel that the university is engaged. Sometimes, passing a constituency to other organizations might be possible. Sometimes, constituents themselves may be interested in disinvesting.

Another member of the audience maintained that the industrial model and agriculture extension model vary in how they conceive of the business relationship. The industrial model says that the client puts all the money on the table and then business will help. In this situation, one also gets involved in proprietary issues involving outcomes generated through the relationship. Agriculture extension models don't have the same history of for-profit orientation.

Panel members did not consider the two models to be very different. Agricultural producers are small businesses. Most were very poor seventy-five years ago and today that is no longer true. Increasingly they can pay for services. The manufacturing model works only as far as clients can pay, but does not work when the business needs a new service or product that requires the investment of a great deal of research and development.

One program at Butterworth ran for five years before it became a program that could pay. Outreach activities cannot be done through a consulting model either, because quick problem-solving doesn't build a constituency. The traditional agricultural extension model has some advantages that the industrial model doesn't have, including history — land-grant universities have been at it for 100 years — and infrastructure. Universities already have county agents dispersed across the states providing feedback and performing educational activities.

Furthermore, various programs yield varying degrees of constituent and political support. Traditional youth programs can marshal constituents to prevent legislative or other action but may not build programs as readily. Agricultural constituencies can build and fund programs, but in the future may begin to lose influence. The new youth-at-risk programs promise to do the same, but the youth constituency currently has limited political influence.

How can a silent constituent be turned into a vocal one? Pippenger responded that a partnership based on a fiscal understanding is not as silent as it seems to be. The Cook Institute is an active, vocal partner with MSU in advocating for resources. Meanwhile, somewhere in the external environment another unserved constituency possesses a new idea or need the university has not addressed. Academic institutions have a responsibility to make it known that they are willing to help these silent constituencies. The university should present outreach as a partnership opportunity. Demands are increasing for program accountability. If the university provides responsive programs and outcome research, funding and clients will ultimately come.