



Outreach, Engagement and Extension

Introduction

The terms outreach, engagement, and Extension have been regularly employed synonymously as broad descriptors of the interaction between a university and the public. Land-grant university relationships with the public have been prevalent for over a century as a central part of the federally legislated Morrill Acts of 1862 & 1890 and the Smith-Lever Act of 1914. In addition, other public and private institutions have taken up the outreach mission (Gavazzi & Gee, 2018; Pruitt, 2022). The Kellogg Commission report in the 1990's spurred a new look at the ideas of outreach, engagement, and Extension, and since, the meanings have been somewhat blurred resulting in multiple interpretations in universities across the country.

What Cooperative Extension Does

The synonymous use of the terms outreach, engagement, and Extension in the literature, paired with the different outreach structures existing at universities, has led to the need for clarity around the differences between the broader terms in the context of the communities served. To begin this process, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) offers a definition for Cooperative Extension:

“Extension provides trusted, practical education, to help people, businesses, and communities solve problems, develop skills, and build a better future. Campus-based faculty members are disciplinary specialists with doctoral degrees whose primary responsibility is to develop curricula that translate science-based research results into language (written, verbal, and electronic) appropriate for targeted audiences. County-based educators (most of whom have graduate degrees) work with local citizens and interest groups to solve problems, evaluate the effectiveness of learning tools, and collect grassroots input to prioritize future research. By living and working in communities, county educators respond to local needs, build trust, and engage effectively with citizens. Program Areas include but are not limited to 4-H Youth Development, Agriculture, Family & Consumer Sciences, Health and Nutrition, Community Development, Water and Natural Resources, Forestry, Emergency Preparedness, Climate Variability, Volunteerism, and Human Sciences.” (APLU.org)

The Differences in the Terms Outreach, Engagement, and Extension

When examining social change in the literature, distinct differences in the words outreach, engagement, and Extension are found. There is also recognition that there is a place for all three when leading social change. Each mode has value according to its intended purpose but are distinctly different processes. When describing outreach, engagement, and Extension in terms of resources, purpose, relationships, interactions, and outcomes or impacts the description of each as unique from the others emerges. Figure 1 shows the emergent differences between the terms as they relate to social change.

Attribute \ Term	Community Outreach	Community Engagement	Cooperative Extension
Funding/Resources	State, grants, & contracts	State, grants, & contracts	Federal, state, local, grants, & contracts
Legislative Mandate	Morrill Acts 1862, 1890, & 1994	Morrill Acts 1862, 1890, & 1994	Smith-Lever Act of 1914
Length of Interaction	Short-term	Long-term	Continuous
Type of Relationship	Marketing	Relationship building	Symbiotic
Style of Interaction	What can A do for B?	What can A and B do together?	How can A and B learn and improve from each other?
Outcome/Impact	One group benefits most	Multiple groups benefit	All group benefit
Purpose of Relationship	Transactional	Connecting & Supportive	Transformational
Communication	Directional	Cyclical	Intentional

Figure 1. Differences in outreach, engagement, and extension. Note. Information adapted from content leadingdifferently.com

Outreach is the act of extending content, information, knowledge, service, etc. in a one-way exchange without an expectation of reciprocity. Outreach interactions may be evaluated by capturing the number served through the connection. Engagement, while also extending knowledge or a service, has the expectation of mutual involvement, and connection over an extended period. Engagement may be measured by the broader impact beyond the learner or group and continued follow-up indicating progress toward goals. Extension includes both outreach and engagement functions while striving for a deeper symbiotic connection with the learner and the community in which they reside. The work of Extension is best measured by documenting social change among the people and communities served.

The Differences at Work in Extension

The initial analysis and comparison between descriptors identify the desired state of the optimal function within each description. It should be recognized Community Engagement and Cooperative Extension often operate similarly to Community Outreach. A variety of factors contribute to the nature of Community Outreach and Cooperative Extension work that may keep them from reaching their intended desired states. For example, employee turnover, changes in community/university actors and their commitments to long-term and/or continuous relationships, external factors such as extreme weather events/public health concerns, and financial issues will mitigate efforts to stay at the desired state and therefore, leads to social exchange that flows across each of the three modes.

Sources

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- Pruitt, S. T. (2022). Road Map to the Future of Engagement for Both Land-Grant and Non-Land-Grant Institutions. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 14(3), 2.

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