

Organizational Priorities for Advancing Cooperative Extension in Selected Urban Counties in Florida

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Abstract

Determining strategies for success within the urban environment is necessary for Cooperative Extension to accomplish its mission, particularly given the large percentage of Americans who now reside in or near cities. Three levels of needs exist within a system such as Extension: primary user, service provider, and system resources. A needs assessment was conducted in 2017 to assess the system resources of UF/IFAS Extension in the counties of one of Florida's four metropolitan areas, as perceived by the county faculty and staff working there. Counties tended to agree that the highest priority needs were to establish guidelines for reporting collective impact efforts in their annual appraisals, and ensuring agents have equal benefits regardless of the county in which they work. A strong emphasis was also placed on making urban Extension visible to stakeholders in the metropolitan environment. UF/IFAS Extension will need to acquire new resources or reallocate existing resources to better equip its agents to be successful serving urban clientele, which may require adopting new funding models to ensure the future viability of the organization.

Keywords: urban; cooperative extension; priorities; metropolitan

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Introduction

The United States' population is decidedly urban. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), "Urban areas – defined as densely developed residential, commercial and other nonresidential areas – now account for 80.7 percent of the U.S. population" (para. 2). In Florida, approximately 88% of the population lived in urban areas in 2013 and continued urban population growth is expected (Florida Department of Transportation, 2015). The efficient allocation of resources to meet the needs of swelling urban populations is of concern to urban residents, policy makers, and service providers, including Cooperative Extension. Fox, Ruemenapp, Proden, and Gaolach (2017) asserted "It is imperative that Extension create a modified paradigm of learning

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innovations and a vibrant and resilient 21st-century Extension system that more fully serves urban populations” (“Conclusion,” para. 1).

Several challenges face Extension programs in urban areas. Traditional Extension programming is based on the values and norms of rural communities (Webster & Ingram, 2007). However, urban communities tend to hold a diverse mix of cultures, attitudes, and norms. These factors play a significant role in planning and delivering Extension programs (Webster & Ingram, 2007). Additionally, Extension is challenged by limited financial resources due to declining budgets, a lack of awareness of Extension in urban areas, inadequate networks and partnerships between Extension and urban agencies, and limited overlap of priority issues specific to an urban context (Borich, 2001). On the centennial of Extension, Henning, Buchholz, Steele, and Ramaswamy (2014) highlighted the need for Extension to serve urban clientele by adapting its programming, methodologies, and approaches to meeting the challenges of non-traditional audiences.

In recognition of the growing importance of urban Extension, UF/IFAS Extension developed and implemented a Strategic Plan for Extension in metropolitan regions. The UF/IFAS Urban Extension Strategic Plan aims to “develop knowledge in human, natural, and agricultural resources and to make that knowledge accessible in metropolitan regions to sustain and enhance the quality of human life” (UF/IFAS Extension, 2015, p. 1). The strategic plan focuses on enterprise competitiveness, natural resources, energy conservation, community health and development, and youth in urban areas. There is a lack of knowledge about what Extension agents need and how the Extension organization can best support them to serve urban audiences. The success of urban Extension depends on professional development for agents, new resources, and volunteer management strategies (Henning et al., 2014; Webster & Ingram, 2007). This study sought to identify the most urgent organizational needs at the county level of Extension based on the priorities of the UF/IFAS Urban Extension Strategic Plan.

Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

Extension must seek to prioritize efforts to remain competitive and relevant to urban audiences (Fox et al., 2014). Witkin and Altschuld (1995) noted a needs assessment is the most effective way to decide on resource allocation in organizational planning. A comprehensive and valid needs assessment allows for shared involvement in prioritizing organizational needs and designing suitable actions to address these needs. Kaufman (1988) described a need as a difference between current and desired results or consequences. Witkin and Altschuld (1995) expressed a need as the discrepancy or gap between *what is* (present output) and *what should be* (desired output).

Organizations must continuously monitor their progress to ensure deviations from expected performance and actual performance are minimized and eventually eliminated. A needs assessment allows organizations the ability to recognize such discrepancies in performance standards through an evaluation of the normative needs of the organizational system. Normative needs are value judgements based on resources available to solve problems of the organization (Boyle, 1981). Witkin and Altschuld (1995) formally described a needs assessment as “a systematic set of priorities undertaken for the purpose of setting priorities and making decisions about program or organizational improvement and allocation of resources” (p. 4). The identification of needs is one component of a valid needs assessment, however, its ultimate purpose is to guide policy and program decisions necessary for system improvement (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995).

Boyle (1981) described a need as tension based on Lewin’s (1939) field theory of motivation. The theory posits a system’s natural state is equilibrium and a need represents tension

which results in disequilibrium. If tension causes deviation from the natural state, then there is a strong tendency or motivation to return to the natural state of equilibrium by correcting or satisfying the need (Burnes & Cooke, 2012; Weiner, 1972; Wheeler, 2008). People within the system are motivated to correct for the discrepancy because movement away from the natural state is unpleasant (Weiner, 1972).

Three levels of needs exist within a system: primary user, service provider, and system resources (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). Within the organizational system, the three levels of needs interact and are interdependent on each other. Therefore, discrepancies at one level can affect another level (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). A needs assessment focused on system resources considers the adequacy or capacity of system resources in relation to the needs of service providers and end-users. System resources are the physical infrastructure, policies, procedures, programs, and program delivery mechanisms of the organization (Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). This type of needs assessment can examine the service delivery mechanisms and policies implemented to serve end-users such as urban residents, while revealing gaps in Extension program coverage and delivery due to current system resources.

Boyle (1981) stated the challenge of identifying underlying needs is accumulating the evidence required to compare the present situation to the desired state. Figure 1 illustrates a conceptual gap between the present and desired situations, identified as the area of need. In the present situation, Extension utilizes existing system resources to serve target audiences. The desired situation is hypothesized as the optimal use of resources to serve all audiences. Examining the gap between the current and desired situations can inform the development of appropriate policies to close the gap and improve service to urban audiences.

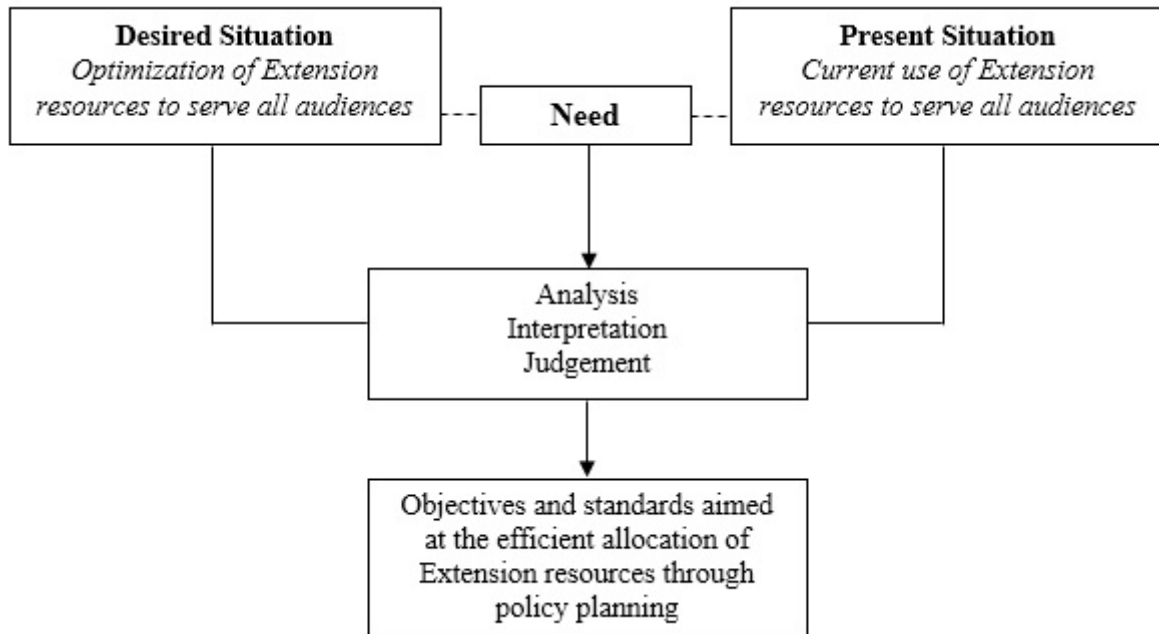


Figure 1. Analyzing, interpreting and judging the gaps in Extension frameworks.

According to Lichter and Brown (2014), issues affecting rural and urban communities are connected, and Extension can serve both audiences without jeopardizing its rural programming. Borich (2001) noted much of Extension’s resources were allocated to rural areas despite increased urbanization. Early literature suggested issues affecting Extension’s ability to serve urban

audiences included limited resources, a lack of awareness among urban populations, limited partnerships with urban constituencies, and fewer programs to address urban issues (Warner, Christenson, Dillman, & Salant, 1996; Fehlis, 1992). Similarly, Stienbarger (2005) noted Extension's ability to meet clientele needs was influenced by increased constraints of funding, staffing, and facilities. Stienbarger further contended the inflexibility of Extension programming restricts agents' responsiveness to meeting the dynamic needs of non-traditional audiences. The disproportionate allocation to rural education and underinvestment in urban programming is "increasingly unsustainable" (Lichter & Brown, 2014, p. 2) for Extension.

Partnerships with diverse agencies are important to Extension's success in urban areas (Fox et al., 2017). For example, partnerships with organizations in metropolitan areas sharing common goals are needed to increase Extension's visibility in urban areas, access greater funding for urban programs, and tailor programming to address the complex needs of urban communities. Fox et al. recommended forming metropolitan advisory councils through collaborations with for-profit and not-for-profit organizations, governmental agencies, and universities. Partnerships can facilitate increased urban Extension education, while maintaining its programming in rural areas (Fox et al., 2017).

Similarly, Peters (2002) stated Extension has the experience needed to build partnerships with relevant agencies. Given the complexity of urban environments, Extension should seek partnerships with urban entities - including its competitors - to meet the diverse needs of urban audiences (Ruemenapp, 2017). Tiffany (2017) stressed the importance of Extension pursuing partnership development with community-based organizations, governmental agencies, and the private sector to create strong connections to urban clientele through collaborative programming. Likewise, Stienbarger (2005) expressed the need for stronger partnerships with other governmental agencies to attract funding and support for Extension programming to serve a changing audience.

A high priority initiative of the UF/IFAS Extension Roadmap is strengthening urban and rural communities, yet Extension faced several challenges to conducting quality programming at the county level (Harder, Lamm, & Strong, 2009; Harder, Moore, Mazurkewicz, & Benge, 2013). Challenges included a marketing deficit where stakeholders connected Extension to a person, rather than the university, and an "antiquated" (Harder et al., 2009, p. 15) view of Extension by stakeholders, exacerbated by the changing demographics. Harder et al. (2009) noted non-traditional audiences lacked awareness of Extension and urban residents historically did not advocate for Extension programming. A lack of awareness of Extension in urban areas also affects its ability to leverage funding from external agencies (Henning et al., 2014; Raison, 2014). Moreover, Extension's history of mainly agrarian programming resulted in some skepticism by urban entities about its ability to meet the needs of urban clientele (Warner et al., 1996). As such, Extension funding is threatened because of its perceived irrelevancy to non-traditional audiences (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy [ECOP], 2007; Murray, 2005).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine the system resource needs of UF/IFAS Extension, as perceived by county faculty and staff working in urban counties. The objectives were to describe perceptions of priority organizational needs, by county, within each of the four strategic plan frameworks. Identifying priority organizational needs will facilitate data-driven decisions regarding the allocation of system resources to support urban Extension in each county.

Methods

This needs assessment focused on the system resources required for Extension to successfully operate in the urban environment. Based on UF/IFAS Extension's Strategic Plan for Urban Extension, the needs assessment sought to identify needs within four frameworks: Institutional, Resources, Implementation, and Partnership. The findings here are part of a larger mixed-methods assessment of UF/IFAS Extension in one of the state's four metropolitan areas. The descriptive study reported here focused on the identification of system resources needs that were perceived as priorities for action within the next twelve months. A census of county faculty and selected staff within the four counties of the metropolitan area was attempted. County Extension Directors were responsible for identifying which staff should be included; all faculty were automatically included. There were 31 potential respondents in the metropolitan area.

Data collection was conducted using an online questionnaire hosted by Qualtrics. The original instrument was researcher-developed based primarily on the Essential Elements within UF/IFAS Extension's Strategic Plan for Urban Extension, which is divided into four frameworks: Institutional, Resources, Implementation, and Partnership. A Delphi process undertaken in 2013 informed the Essential Elements of the Strategic Plan. However, additional items were added based on priorities identified by county faculty and staff during interviews conducted in the larger assessment, consistent with Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorenson's (2006) observation that "Subjects are more inclined to respond to questions they perceive to be relevant and meaningful" (p. 440). The instrument was submitted to the Institutional Review Board at the University of Florida and was determined to be exempt.

Participants were asked to rate the degree to which 53 items were priorities for action in the coming year. There were three items within the Institutional Framework, 31 items within the Resources Framework, 12 items within the Partnership Framework, and 7 items within the Implementation Framework. Response options for each item were: (a) *very low priority*, (b) *somewhat low priority*, (c) *moderate priority*, (d) *somewhat high priority*, and (e) *very high priority*. Participants were also provided with an open-ended question to which they could add any other information not otherwise captured by the instrument. Using Qualtrics' mailing feature enabled the identification of respondents' counties.

Data collection occurred in April and May 2017. Thirty-one potential participants received a personalized invitation to complete the questionnaire using the Qualtrics mailing feature. Two reminders were sent to increase the response rate. There were three respondents from County A, five respondents from County B, 8 respondents from County C, and 9 respondents from County D for a total of 25 respondents (80.65% overall, county response rates varied between 50 – 100%). To estimate non-response bias, early respondents were compared to late respondents as suggested by Lindner, Murphy, and Briers (2001). An independent samples *t*-test indicated there was no statistically significant difference in responses to each of the four sections between early and late respondents.

Data analysis used descriptive statistics. Differences in priorities between counties were assessed by calculating a Point-Score (PS) for each Essential Element (Remmers, Gage, & Rummel, 1943). The PS is a rank-sum estimate and represents a modified index of net difference between items (Liebersohn, 1976). The score was based on the frequency distribution of the item and does not lend itself to parametric assumptions (Herrero & Villar, 2013; Liebersohn, 1976). For each Essential Element, the PS was calculated as follows: $[(1 * \% \text{ very low priority}) + (2 * \% \text{ low priority}) + (3 * \% \text{ moderate priority}) + (4 * \% \text{ high priority}) + (5 * \% \text{ very high priority}) / 100]$. Scores were reported for each county, because the tri-partite funding structure of Extension means significant differences in system resources can exist between counties that could impact an agent's responses to the various items. The PS for each item were interpreted based on the initial labelling

of the ordinal categories as follows: 1.00 – 1.49 = *very low priority*, 1.50 – 2.49 = *somewhat low priority*, 2.50 – 3.49 = *moderate priority*, 3.50 – 4.49 = *somewhat high priority*, and 4.50 – 5.0 = *very high priority*. Interpretation of the ordinal scores on a five-point scale was consistent with the literature in the *Journal of Agricultural Education* (Agbaje, Martin, & Williams, 2001; Dyer & Osborne, 1999; Franklin, 2011; Scales, Terry, & Torres, 2009).

An *ex post facto* analysis of reliability was conducted for the Institutional, Resources, Partnership, and Implementation Framework constructs within the instrument. The Cronbach's alpha levels were .76 for the Institutional Framework, .93 for the Resources Framework, .90 for the Partnership Framework, and .79 for the Implementation Framework. Reliability levels were considered acceptable (Cronbach, 1951; Field, 2013; Taber, 2017).

Findings

The findings are divided into four sections corresponding to the Urban Extension Strategic Plan: Institutional Framework, Extension Resources, Partnership Framework, and Implementation Framework. In each section, Point Scores (PS) are presented for the four urban counties.

Institutional Framework

As shown in Table 1, developing guidelines to address reporting of collective impact efforts in Reports of Accomplishment was rated as a very high priority in County A, C, and D, while rated as a somewhat high priority in County B. Correspondingly, 67% ($n = 2$) of respondents in County A, 63% ($n = 5$) in County B, 80% ($n = 4$) in County C, and 63% ($n = 5$) in County D stated the Essential Element was a very high priority. In contrast, developing guidelines to address reporting of social media efforts in Reports of Accomplishment was rated as a somewhat high priority in County A, B, and D, while it was rated as moderate priority in County C.

Table 1

Priorities for Institutional Framework by County

Priority	County	PS ¹
Obtain financial support from University of Florida to support Extension in departments outside of IFAS (Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences)	A	2.33
	B	3.75
	C	3.00
	D	3.55
Develop guidelines to address reporting of collective impact efforts (e.g. facilitation of collaborative projects) in Reports of Accomplishment	A	4.67
	B	4.13
	C	4.80
	D	4.63
Develop guidelines to address reporting of social media efforts (e.g. updating Facebook regularly, managing county websites) in Reports of Accomplishment	A	3.99
	B	3.75
	C	3.40
	D	4.12

Note. ¹PS = Point Score.

Resources Framework

The top six priorities of the Resources Framework by county are shown in Table 2. Linking the Urban Extension Strategic Plan with IFAS system wide was rated as a very high priority in County C (PS = 4.60), with about 60% ($n = 3$) of respondents from County C stated this was a very high priority. In County D, obtaining dedicated funding to fully implement the Urban Extension Strategic Plan was rated as a very high priority (PS = 4.50), with 63% ($n = 5$) of respondents reporting it was a very high priority. In contrast, developing an external communications plan to give UF/IFAS Extension a recognized presence among urban audiences was a very high priority in County A (PS = 4.67) and County D (PS = 4.63). Most respondents in County A (67%, $n = 2$) and County D (75%, $n = 6$) indicated an external communications plan was a very high priority.

Table 2

Priorities for Resources Framework by County

Priority	County	PS
Link the Urban Extension Strategic Plan with IFAS system wide	A	4.00
	B	4.25
	C	4.60
	D	3.88
Obtain dedicated funding to fully implement the Urban Extension Strategic Plan	A	4.00
	B	3.75
	C	4.00
	D	4.50
Improved system of communication with specialists	A	4.33
	B	3.88
	C	4.20
	D	4.00
Develop an external communications plan to give UF/IFAS Extension a recognized presence among urban audiences	A	4.67
	B	3.63
	C	3.80
	D	4.63
Create a strategy for communicating the value of Urban Extension programming to urban stakeholders	A	4.33
	B	4.00
	C	3.80
	D	4.38
Establish new relationships with community locations (e.g. businesses or organizations) where Extension programs can be provided.	A	4.33
	B	4.00
	C	3.60
	D	4.25

Partnerships Framework

Table 3 shows the six highest priorities of the Partnership Framework by county. Ensuring MOUs with counties to provide all UF/IFAS Extension employees with state-level personal and sick leave benefits was a rated as very high priority in County A (PS = 5.00) and B (PS = 4.63). All respondents of County A ($n = 3$), and 75% ($n = 6$) of those in County B reported this Essential Element as a very high priority. Developing partnerships with colleges and universities within the [redacted] metro area to work collaboratively on issues of common interest was rated as very high priority in County C (PS = 4.50). About 50% ($n = 2$) of respondents in County C stated higher

education partnerships were a very high priority, and 50% ($n = 2$) indicated it was a somewhat high priority. In County D, identifying new partners within local urban communities for cooperation on projects and programming aligned with urban needs was rated as very high priority (PS = 4.58), with 57% ($n = 4$) in agreement.

Table 3

Priorities within the Partnership Framework by County

Priority	County	PS
Create a framework for cooperation with municipal, county, state, and Federal agencies	A	4.33
	B	3.25
	C	3.25
	D	4.15
Ensure MOUs with counties provide all UF/IFAS Extension employees with state-level personal and sick leave benefits	A	5.00
	B	4.63
	C	4.00
	D	3.58
Develop partnerships with colleges and universities within the [redacted] metro area to work collaboratively on issues of common interest	A	4.33
	B	3.75
	C	4.50
	D	4.43
Create a strategy to identify and develop cooperative agreements with NGOs within the local urban community	A	4.00
	B	3.25
	C	3.50
	D	4.14
Identify new partners within local urban communities for cooperation on projects and programming aligned with urban needs	A	4.00
	B	3.13
	C	3.25
	D	4.58
Acquire sponsors who are engaged to support Urban Extension initiatives to address regional needs	A	4.00
	B	4.00
	C	3.25
	D	3.43

Implementation Framework

Table 4 shows the highest priorities of the Implementation Framework by county. Only one Essential Element, increasing the number of demonstration projects designed and delivered to address urban needs, was rated a very high priority in County C. About half the number of respondents from County C ($n = 2$) indicated this was a very high priority, while 50% ($n = 2$) stated it was a somewhat high priority.

Table 4

Priorities within the Implementation Framework by County

Priority	County	PS
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Conduct educational needs assessments in cooperation with local partners	A	3.67
	B	3.13
	C	4.00
	D	4.15
County faculty receive support from IFAS to provide consulting, project design, and management service to local governments	A	4.00
	B	3.13
	C	4.00
	D	2.72
Increase number of coordinated statewide web-based education programs tailored for urban audiences	A	3.67
	B	3.63
	C	3.75
	D	3.43
Increase number of demonstration projects designed and delivered to address urban needs	A	4.00
	B	3.50
	C	4.50
	D	3.43
Increase number of creative works and publications that demonstrate innovation in concepts, procedures, and application of science for Urban Extension	A	3.67
	B	3.38
	C	3.00
	D	3.00
Develop new standards to evaluate activities for efficiency and effectiveness in addressing urban needs	A	4.00
	B	3.00
	C	3.75
	D	3.86

Conclusions, Implications, & Recommendations

Gaps exist between the idealized conditions outlined in the UF/IFAS Extension Strategic Plan for Urban Extension and the perceived reality reported by the faculty and staff working within one major metropolitan area, which means there are needs that should be addressed (Boyle, 1981). However, only a small proportion of the Strategic Plan Essential Elements were identified as very high priorities from the viewpoint of participants and most of those resided within the Resources Framework. This is consistent with prior literature (Borich, 2001; Lichter & Brown, 2014; Stienbarger, 2005; Warner et al., 1996) which emphasized the importance of making sufficient resources available for Extension programming in the urban environment.

Agents identified the need for administration to establish guidelines for reporting collective impact efforts in their annual appraisals (known as Reports of Accomplishment [ROA]). In the urban areas, Extension is well positioned to work collectively with the rich abundance of service providers that share complementary missions and overlapping target audiences. University-level expertise, knowledge of local networks, and a research-based orientation to addressing problems are some of the assets of UF/IFAS Extension that lend themselves well to working in the collective impact arena. The respondents within this study acknowledged those opportunities, indicating a desire to identify new partners within local urban communities and to collaborate with local colleges and universities. Expanding partnerships has often been recommended as a strategy for Extension in the urban environment (Peters, 2002; Ruemenapp, 2017; Stienbarger, 2005). Agents urgently need guidelines for reporting their collective impact efforts given that UF/IFAS Extension is a promotion and permanent status system, and agents are often hesitant to spend time on activities that may not be credited within their ROAs.

Ensuring all agents receive state-level personal and sick leave benefits is a priority concern. In the urban area studied, the Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) between the counties and the state vary which results in differential benefits. An agent in one county will have less leave for doing the same job as an agent in another county, based on the terms of the MOU. Two counties noted this was a very high priority, although it only directly impacts one of the counties. A possible ramification of MOUs with differing personal and sick leave benefits is that the county with fewer benefits will be viewed as a less desirable location to work. UF/IFAS Extension should seek to provide all county agents with the same level of benefits. Harder, Gouldthorpe, and Goodwin (2014) found generous family emergency leave and sick leave policies in Extension were the third most positive motivators for agents, behind the opportunity to make a difference and variety in daily job duties.

Variability existed within agents' ratings of the importance of the Essential Elements within the Resources Framework. For example, respondents from one county indicated hiring additional programmatic support staff was a very high priority while the other respondents did not. This county has fewer support staff relative to their neighboring counties in the same urban area. Financial support provided by counties can and does vary significantly and this likely accounts for the observed variance between counties as they evaluated the priority level of various resources. As Stienbarger (2005) noted, resource constraints will impact the level of service that UF/IFAS Extension can provide in the densely populated urban environment.

Resource allocation is often associated with the visibility of Extension, particularly within the urban environment (Fox et al., 2017). Two of the counties in this study indicated there was a very high need for an external communications plan to give UF/IFAS Extension a recognized presence among urban audiences. Similarly, all counties reported it was a somewhat high priority for the value of Urban Extension programming to be strategically communicated to urban stakeholders. These findings are consistent with the lack of awareness of Extension in Florida previously found by Harder et al. (2009, 2013). If UF/IFAS Extension's level of visibility among urban audiences and key stakeholders remains constant, then it seems doubtful that efforts to acquire the additional funding necessary to address the priorities noted in this study will be successful.

Witkin and Altschuld (1995) asserted the importance of assessing system resources as a mechanism for understanding an organization's ability to meet the needs of its service providers and service users. There are several recommendations for UF/IFAS Extension to implement to address the highest priorities identified in the study. UF/IFAS Extension should: (a) develop new guidelines for reporting collecting impact efforts in ROAs, (b) develop new or optimize existing funding streams to meet the individual resource needs of each office, (c) raise the profile of urban Extension through public awareness campaigns and internally within the organization's overall guiding document, (d) explore opportunities to revise existing MOUs so all UF/IFAS Extension agents are afforded equal personal and sick leave benefits, and (e) establish and expand partnerships with other urban service providers to maximize the strengths of each and more strategically work together to address issues of common interest. These steps would be instrumental in moving UF/IFAS Extension closer to its goal of serving all audiences effectively.

This study focused exclusively on one metropolitan area, but linkages with previous Extension research suggest some of the same challenges may be found in other metropolitan areas. Extension organizations focusing on improving their efforts in urban areas may want to closely examine their internal performance policies, employee benefits, financial resources and allocation strategies, and marketing. Providing a solid organizational foundation is an important precursor to effective service in urban areas.

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