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# State Administrators' Perspectives on Environmental Factors Facing Cooperative Extension

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**Abstract**

*Cooperative Extension is a complex organization with a mission to deliver research from the Land-Grant University to all U.S. communities. This qualitative Grounded Theory study investigated State Extension administrators' perspectives on the environmental factor changes facing the organization and their responses to inform the direction for organization adaptation. Data were collected from seven State Extension Directors and 13 State 4-H Program Leaders from four 1862 Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities administrative regions. The participation of both State Extension Directors and 4-H Program Leaders was to provide two vantage points on the phenomena. Data were analyzed through open coding and axial coding. Findings reveal that Cooperative Extension can remain relevant and meet the needs of individuals and communities, if the organization can adapt in response to the identified environmental factors. Categories of environmental factors that Cooperative Extension is facing include changes in funding, clientele demographics, and community power changes. Organizational adaptation can cause long-term stakeholders to fear loss and act against the organization. This article establishes theory of pushback to Cooperative Extension adaptation called shifting focus friction (SFF). Administrators must be responsive to traditional stakeholder concerns and build a shared understanding of the mission to reduce SFF and facilitate the organization adaptation necessary for survival.*

## Introduction

Like any organization, Cooperative Extension's environmental factors continuously change. Environmental factors are those outside influences that impact an organization's ability to operate (Nadler & Tushman, 1977, 1980; Scott, 2003). Environmental factors create a contextual matrix comprised of society's political, historical, geographical, and cultural dimensions that influence an organization's relationships and activities (Lamm et al., 2021; Lewis, 2006). The continual and ever shifting external environment informs the direction for Extensions' adaptation rationale.

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Recognizing these contextual shifts is essential for Extension to meet its mission of providing access to educational programming that translates science for practical application, allowing people to change their practices and attitudes while learning new behaviors (Bailey et al., 1909; Bull et al., 2004; Caillouet & Harder, 2021). A robust literature on organizational environmental factors and program adaption exists within the Cooperative Extension literature. Unfortunately, this body of work generally omits state Extension administrators' perspectives on organizational environmental factors. And assessments of Cooperative Extension rarely include national data, instead capturing perspectives from state or regional levels (e.g., Caillouet & Harder, 2021; Lamm et al., 2021).

The many factors facing Cooperative Extension have contributed to organizational change or calls for change in Extension. For the United States' 1862 Land-Grant University (LGU) Cooperative Extension system, the environmental factors cited in the literature include the Extension financial crisis (Bull et al., 2004; Graf, 1993; McDowell, 2004; Morse, 2009), changing funding requirements (Franz, 2013, 2015; Kalambokidis, 2004; Lamm et al, 2020), significant population demographic shifts (Erbstein et al., 2017; Fox, et al., 2017; Henning et al., 2014), employee retention and recruitment (Narine et al., 2020) and the use of technology (Davis et al., 2021; Dorn & Hobbs, 2020; Sneed & Franck, 2021), as well as the nature of information (Narine et al., 2020; Rivera, 2000). A study of the state of Florida also found similar factors: urbanization, education with online technology, conflicting messages, and diverse audiences (Caillouet & Harder, 2021). Caillouet and Harder (2021) also found some recommended approaches to resolving the issue through focusing on science-based information, building partnerships, and engaging stakeholders. It is important to note that the environmental factors exerting forces on organizational adaptation are not always the same as the topical issues that cause Extension to shift and change towards specific content—i.e., climate change or the opioid epidemic (Caillouet, 2022).

Extension adaptation theorizing at the turn of the 21st century offered three distinct responses to the aforementioned large-scale shifts in organization orientation (Hoag, 2005). The first is that Extension is no longer relevant and will—or should—become extinct (Ward et al., 2009). Others state that a change in mission is causing organizational shortcomings because Extension has moved away from its roots in agriculture and lost support from historically significant supporters (Bull et al, 2004). Meanwhile, a third stance is that Extension has not moved sufficiently away from a focus on agriculture, expressing lament that this programmatic movement has not yet occurred (McDowell, 2004). Further, Strong et al. (2015) theorize that Extension needs to adapt from an information-centric to a community-centric program. The existence of these contrasting hypothesis illustrates that the direction for Cooperative Extension adaptation remains unclear, and the literature over the last decade has not contributed further systematic clarity or dialogue.

## Study Purpose

Using a grounded theory approach, the researcher is open to following the data where the data and phenomena lead the researcher (Creamer, 2021). This study's initial research question was: What environmental factors do State Extension administrators—State Extension Directors and State 4-H Program Leaders—perceive as challenging for their Extension organization? And what are the resulting organizational responses being followed to address these environmental factors?

## Methods

This research received approval from the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB). The methodology and data from this study have been previously published (see Elliott-Engel et al., 2020; Elliott-Engel, Westfall-Rudd, Kaufman et al., 2021.; Elliott-Engel, Westfall-Rudd, Seibel et al., 2021; and Elliott-Engel et al., 2024).

## Grounded Theory Framework

Grounded theory was first introduced to address the need to account for the complexity and diversity of social phenomena and an approach to utilize empirical data to develop theory (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology that aims to generate theories based on data grounded in the research context's empirical reality (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Grounded theory has been widely used in sociology, psychology, management, and other social sciences to study a wide range of phenomena, such as organizational behavior (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Grounded theory is used to uncover the meanings of people's social actions, interactions, and experiences. These explanations are called 'grounded' because they are grounded in the participants' explanations or interpretations (Creamer, 2021). Two main types of grounded theory exist: Classic Grounded Theory and Constructivist Grounded Theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Classic Grounded Theory emphasizes the discovery of a theory grounded in data without being influenced by preconceived notions or existing theories (Creamer, 2021). Constructivist Grounded Theory emphasizes the role of the researcher in the process of theory development (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This paper used classical grounded theory to frame the approach.

The Classic Grounded Theory method involves a systematic collection, coding, categorization, and analysis process to identify patterns and relationships in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The goal is to develop a theory that explains the phenomenon being studied based on the data collected and analyzed rather than on preconceived notions or hypotheses (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Creamer (2021) acknowledges that Classic Grounded Theory begins without a theoretical framework, yet the researcher does need to be situated in the literature and the nature of the phenomena. The Classic Grounded Theory approach was suited particularly well for the phenomena of environmental factors facing Cooperative Extension as there was a lack of clarity in the literature and few, if any studies had collected State Extension administrators' perspectives in a systematic empirical approach.

## Population

Each LGU has its organizational structures, yet each LGU has an individual serving as the Director of Extension and State 4-H Program Leader. We identified the person and contact information for each distinct role at 1862 LGU through website searches. There are only 57 individuals to recruit for both of these populations, with a total population of 114. Therefore, it is important to understand that these individuals are part of a high-profile and small population, and we have taken measures to obscure their identities in the demographic data throughout – some examples include providing pseudonyms and sharing only the number of participants who have participated by region.

Vasileiou et al. (2018) encourages qualitative researchers to describe and justify sample sizes. Before recruitment, we hypothesized that a sample size of two State 4-H Program Leaders and Extension Directors per APLU region would be sufficient for data saturation. This was hypothesized because two individuals from each region and role would allow for a beginning triangulation. Hypothetically, the 16 participants proposed for the study would provide multiple perspectives from each region, allowing for variance to be considered (Charmaz, 2014). Individuals were invited by email to participate in this study, with three rounds of invitations having been sent. The IRB approved protocol allowed for phone call follow-ups to solicit participants, and phone calls were applied for regions that needed additional participation to meet minimum requirements. A request was made for both the State 4-H Program Leader and Extension Director to participate; however, that was not a requirement for participation. We discontinued recruitment after extensive recruitment efforts, and data saturation indicated that further participants were not needed.

Twenty State Extension administrators, including seven state Extension directors and 13 state 4-H program leaders, agreed to be interviewed (see Table 1 for demographic characteristics). Once recruitment started, we did not turn away any volunteers for the study. We had nearly double the state 4-H program

leaders responding (N = 13), but we did fall short of our hypothesized participant goal by one state Extension director (N = 7). Broad geographic regions and administrator roles by region are presented in Table 2. Participants represented 15 states and all four administrative regions of the APLU. Because the study participants represented 15 states, a more rich perspective was offered than originally proposed. Leadership from this broader range of states also brought breadth of experiences with an array of factors (i.e., organizational structure, politics, geographies).

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics* (N=20)

| Category | Options | State Extension Director | State 4-H Program Leader | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 5 | 6 | 11 |
| | Female | 2 | 7 | 9 |
| Age | 18-29 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | 30-49 | 0 | 5 | 5 |
| | 50-64 | 5 | 7 | 12 |
| | 65+ | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Race/Ethnicity | White | 7 | 12 | 19 |
| | Hispanic | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Black | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Years of Extension Employment | 0-10 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| | 11-20 | 2 | 7 | 9 |
| | 21-30 | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| | 31+ | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| Highest Degree Level Earned | Bachelors | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Masters | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| | Doctorate | 7 | 12 | 19 |
| University Title Level | Director | 2 | 11 | 13 |
| | Department Head | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| | Dean | 4 | 1 | 5 |
| | Chancellor | 1 | 0 | 1 |

*Note.* The demographic survey questions were open-ended. The demographic labels relayed in this table represent codes established to systematize the responses.

We withheld specific state data to ensure participants' anonymity. Table 2 presents the broad geographic regions and administrator roles within each region. Pseudonyms were attributed to participants but have not been presented with the demographics to help protect the anonymity of the study participants who are a part of this high-profile and small population. Participants represented 15 states and all four administrative regions of the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU). The 15 states included in the study represented cross-sections of small

to large geographic areas, heavily urban to primarily rural, economically thriving to economically struggling, and politically liberal to conservative populations.

**Table 2**

*Study Participants by APLU[1] Region and Administrative Role*

| APLU[1] Region | Administrative Role | Number |
|---|---|---|
| North Central | State Extension Directors | 2 |
| | State 4-H Program Leaders | 3 |
| Northeast | State Extension Directors | 0 |
| | State 4-H Program Leaders | 4 |
| Southern | State Extension Directors | 3 |
| | State 4-H Program Leaders | 3 |
| Western | State Extension Directors | 2 |
| | State 4-H Program Leaders | 3 |
| Totals | State Extension Directors | 7 |
| | State 4-H Program Leaders | 13 |

*Note.* [1]Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU).

## Data Collection and Analysis

Participants completed a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis for both Extension and the 4-H program in their state. A SWOT analysis is a management assessment tool (Lamm et al., 2021; Pickton & Wright, 1998). Participants completed the analysis as an exercise before the interview and then reflected on what they prepared during the interview.

Semi-structured interviews were used as the data collection technique for this study to reconstruct subjective theories (see Table 3 for the interview protocol). The term "subjective theory" refers to the interviewees' complex knowledge about the topic under study (Flick, 2006). We chose semi-structured interviews as the inquiry method for study participants to articulate their subjective theories and implicit assumptions. The semi-structured interview is an inquiry method that combines a predetermined set of open questions, questions that prompt discussion, and the interviewer's opportunity to explore a particular response and emergent themes (Charmaz, 2014). The lead author conducted one-on-one interviews with each participant via Zoom. Interviews ranged from 44 to 114 minutes.

**Table 3**

*Interview Protocol Guide for the Research Question*

| Literature | Interview Question |
|---|---|
| Environmental Factor Shifts | You were provided a fillable document prior to the interview, which is a SWOT analysis. A SWOT analysis asks a program manager to identify Strengths, Weakness, Opportunity, Threats for the organization. I have asked you to do this independently for both Extension and 4-H programs. Would you tell me about your SWOT analysis for Cooperative Extension? |

| Literature | Interview Question |
|---|---|
| Organizational Adaptation | You have identified several things on your radar in your SWOT analysis. Which of these do you think will necessitate Extension and/or the 4-H program to change. Why? |
| | What is unique about this(ese) that will require change? |
| | Looking at your SWOT analysis, thinking about organizational factors, what would you describe as a crisis for Extension? |
| | How well is the organization coping with changes in its environment over time? |
| | How well is the organization coping with changes in its environment over time? |
| | Please explain in your own words if Extension is relevant today? Why do you say that? |

Data saturation is critical in grounded theory as it guides the data collection process. Data saturation occurs when the collection and analysis of new data yields no further insights or information about the phenomenon under study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). With grounded theory, data analysis and collection occur iteratively until theoretical saturation is reached. It is important to recognize that saturation is a predictive determination that the unobserved will be similar to the observed (Engler, 2021). Thus, saturation is a researcher's judgment. Data was collected and analyzed from the proposed participants. A second round of data was not required as saturation had been achieved.

Data preparation and analysis commenced with the first interview, and data collection, preparation, and analysis occurred simultaneously through a constant comparison method (Glaser, 1965). I prepared the data for analysis by transcribing the audio recordings verbatim. The transcripts were prepared for line-by-line coding in Atlas.ti. Open coding is frequently used in qualitative analysis (Dooley, 2007). The term open means the researcher has not previously established a codebook (Charmaz, 2014). Open coding requires each discrete piece of data to be given a descriptive label (Charmaz, 2014). Line-by-line coding refers to applying codes to each line of qualitative data (Charmaz, 2014). We established open codes and revised code definitions as the data analysis occurred for each line of these data. To ensure consistency in code meaning, the lead researcher established the code definitions and revised code meanings throughout the analysis.

Axial coding was used to analyze the codes of response and was used to establish categories and themes. Axial coding is the second coding step of grounded theory, where connections between ideas in your research are established and exposed (Creamer, 2021). Axial coding relies heavily on memoing and reflexivity in understanding the connections between data (Creamer, 2021). We wrote memos and re-analyzed the data to develop axial codes. I analyzed the data for conditions and consequences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Rice & Kitchel, 2018).

For category and theme development, the researchers grouped congruent open codes (Williams & Moser, 2019). Additionally, we sorted codes into like-categories. In a third analysis round, we grouped these codes into overarching themes. Then, the researchers coded the themes as Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, and Threat for Extension using the definitions provided by Pickton and

Wright (1998). These data still had meaning that was not captured in the previous two analyses, and thus, themes of response were established.

We used memoing to expose researcher biases and to ensure that coding reflected the participant's meaning (Blair, 2015). Memoing is the process of researcher meaning-making of the data and applying reflexivity. Memoing occurred throughout the coding and theme development (Charmaz, 2014).

Trustworthiness is an appropriate criterion for evaluating qualitative research (Maher et al., 2018). To support trustworthiness, we employed member checking and data triangulation. We shared completed interview transcripts with each participant before data analysis to clarify participants' meaning and ensure theme development accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2017). We received only minor corrections to transcripts, which corrected for spelling or clarity of voice, from the participants.

Data triangulation refers to using multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to comprehensively understand phenomena (Patton, 1999). It has also been argued that data triangulation is a qualitative research strategy to test validity by converging information from different sources (Carter et al., 2014). For this study, we chose two populations with experience with this phenomenon to support data triangulation. In Atlas.ti, the manuscripts of state 4-H program leaders and state Extension directors were coded into separate groups, allowing the codes to be viewed and compared by the two populations. Data were compared for congruency and saturation. Data were not divergent between the two populations once themes were created and coding into SWOT categories occurred. Having a clear research plan and approaching the study reflexively contributes to qualitative validity, which is congruency between the study's findings and the participant's meaning (Creswell, 2014).

## Reflexivity Statement

In qualitative research, the investigator must keep the research objective(s) in mind (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2014). When the researcher is part of the analysis instrument, it is important to recognize that their background, culture, and experiences may shape their interpretations; this process of consciousness and reflection is called reflexivity (Creswell, 2014). All researchers in this study have had personal and professional experiences with the U.S. Cooperative Extension System and 4-H, and all believe that Extension is essential for the 21st century. For example, the lead author was a 4-H member and 4-H youth development professional for six years prior to conducting the data collection. We each also hold a perspective that Cooperative Extension has room to grow and must adapt to stay relevant.

## Limitations

The change process is temporal, and the research process is static (Corbin & Strauss, 2008); thus, this research project has limitations in transferability. Research can only illuminate one moment in time or construct past occurrences through the lens of the actors' experiences up to that moment (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). This study is not a comparative case study of organizations or administrative roles; it was used to assess individual actors' perspectives on their organizations.

With all qualitative research, data, and meaning-making are collected until saturation is achieved rather than being quantitatively representative (Creswell, 2014). Thus, this study is limited in its generalizability to the 1862 U.S. Extension system.

Using State 4-H Program Leaders as one of the populations limits the data's usefulness. This population provides a consistent administrative role that is present in every LGU across the country which contributes towards trustworthiness. Yet, it does provide a limited perspective from State Extension Administrators on the entirety of the Cooperative Extension system in the state.

## Results

Administrators recognized key challenges: the nature of financial resources at the federal, state, and local levels; figuring out the appropriate use of technology in conducting Extension work; and the impact that urbanization and the resulting shrinking rural communities pose for Extension. Additionally, administrators recognize the challenges faced by the increasing diversity in rural and urban communities. Throughout the discussion of the challenges by administrators, they consistently saw the importance of remaining focused on delivering agricultural education; however, there was a reframing of agriculture as focusing on not only production but also food, and then, in turn, health. Table 4 provides the open codes that were joined into categories and then into themes. The themes are presented with the contributing data throughout this section.

**Table 4**

*Open Codes, Categories, Themes, and Axial Codes Resulting from the Data Analysis*

| Open Codes | Categories | Themes | Axial Codes |
|---|---|---|---|
| Flat funding at federal level | Federal funding | Financial resources | |
| Federal funding is important | | | |
| Funding is community specific at state level | State funding | | |
| Funding is significant at state level | | | |
| Legislative engagement is important | | | |
| County funding constantly shifting | County funding | | |
| County funding based on county capacity (urban vs rural) | | | |
| Presenting evaluation data matters | Importance of Extension benefit evidence | | |
| Outcomes need to be communicated to stakeholders | | | |
| Grants impact organization focus | | | |
| Grants are short-term | | | |
| Grants cause choppy service | | | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Technology is an important tool | Technology | Technology |
| Not doing enough with technology | | |
| Technology reaches more people | High tech and high touch | |
| Technology can remove relationship | | |
| Urban citizens engaged with agriculture | Urbanization and rural communities | Urbanization |
| Urban communities are huge | | |
| Hard to make impact in urban communities | | |
| More competition in urban communities | | |
| Pipeline is not preparing diverse Extension professionals | | |
| Pipeline is not preparing urban Extension professionals | | |
| Bringing strength of agricultural education into the urban context | Opportunities in the urban landscape | |
| Urban municipalities have capacity to provide funding | | |
| Extension must serve all clients | Diversity in our communities | Diversity in our communities |
| Hispanic/Latino populations | | |
| Refugee and ESL populations | | |
| African American populations | | |
| Asian American populations | | |
| Native American populations | | |
| LGBTQ+ populations | | |
| Still underserving non-white populations | | |
| Striving to serve all citizens | | |
| Agriculture is the mission | The mission remains agriculture | The mission remains agriculture |
| Mission needs to be framed differently | | |
| Agriculture is food | | |
| Good food is health | | |
| A healthy agriculture industry is a healthy community | | |
| Urban legislators increasing | Power shifts | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Urban legislators don't know Extension | | Shifting Focus Friction | Lack of Understanding of the mission |
| Urban legislators need education on Extension | | | |
| Rural community push back on changes | Long-standing relationships | | |
| Rural community is shrinking | | | Deep appreciation for programming |
| Long standing relationships matter for political support | | | |
| Long standing clientele are passionate | | | |
| Long standing clientele care deeply | | | |
| Long standing clientele advocate for the organization | Stakeholders are fearful of loss | | Perceptions of loss of resources |
| Long standing clientele advocate for personal benefits | | | |
| Long standing organizations don't support adaptation | | | |
| Long standing organizations' want continued deliverables | | | |

**SWOT Analysis Results**

Table 5 is the result of the authors coding the categories into a respective SWOT category as defined by Pickton and Wright (1996).

**Table 5**

*Environmental Factors Influencing Extension Described by State Extension Administrators*

| | **Positive Factors** | **Negative Factors** |
|---|---|---|
| Internal Factors | Strengths<br>▪ The Mission remains agriculture<br>▪ Long-standing relationships | Weaknesses<br>▪ Technology<br>▪ Diversity in our communities |
| External Factors | Opportunities<br>▪ Importance of Extension benefit evidence<br>▪ High Tech and High Touch<br>▪ Opportunities in the Urban landscape | Threats<br>▪ Federal<br>▪ State funding<br>▪ County funding<br>▪ Urbanization and rural communities<br>▪ Power shifts<br>▪ Stakeholders are fearful of loss |

## Financial Resources

Recognition of financial reduction as a crisis was relayed at all federal, state, and county levels. Each level of financial support—federal, state, county—was influenced by different trends, impacts, and responses for administrators.

### *Federal funding*

Federal funding is important to the whole organization. Administrators relayed that Smith-Lever funds have been at flat funding levels. This is a critical threat because Smith-Lever funds provide flexible base support along with the matching funding from the state and county, and extramural grants. Flat funding levels translate to shrinking resources due to inflation. Numerous administrators talked about the need, and opportunity, to expand opportunities to find federal funding partners across the federal government.

### *State funding*

Administrators' perspective on their respective state was based on the unique state's economy, politics, and culture. Extension is "a hundred variations on a theme." At the state level, relationships between administrators and their state legislature are incredibly important because of the significant financial contributions of the state legislature. "We engage [with] our legislature a lot because 42 percent of our funding comes from the legislature; [it's] the way we fund our program," stated Nancy. Regular contact with the legislature is used to monitor concerns and to attempt to grow financial support.

### *County funding*

Administrators recognized the constantly shifting status of financial support from counties. Extension is a significant portion of some county government budgets in rural counties. Others see successes in receiving funding from urban communities because Extension is a small expenditure. Carolyn relayed both thoughts when she said, "In a small, rural county, Extension might be 15 percent of their budget, whereas if you look at [an] urban county, it's not even one percent." The difference in capacity contributes to each county's constantly shifting financial status and the challenge that county funding provides for the system.

### *Importance of Evidence of Extension Benefit*

The need for evaluation is emphasized due to its connection to financial strings. In recognition of the changing contract between legislatures and public service organizations through the shrinking number of public dollars available, it has always been thought that there is a need to communicate research impacts better. Nancy recognized the need for evaluation and for putting resources behind that initiative "We invested a number of years ago in program evaluators to really evaluate the work that we're doing and so that we can talk about . . . [how] our work makes a difference… what were the outcomes." Nancy elaborates that when they could communicate specific impacts and outcomes, the legislature can be responsive. Outcomes must be disseminated widely to stakeholders to share those messages from multiple directions. Administrators

recognized temporary/non-permanent resources as the new normal and as necessary. The use of grants is recognized as a challenge to remain focused on the organization's mission. Grants are term-limited, which can create a discontinuity of service in communities.

### Technology

Administrators embrace the use of technology to do Extension work and have been investing in the use of technology. While technology is present in the work, it does not have the same effect as personal education, but it is a delivery mode that should be explored. The two concerns that administrators consistently reported were, first, a concern that with reduced budgets, there would be growing pressure to deliver educational materials online. Second, there was a fear that Extension would be forced to deliver more and more content electronically or digitally and that they are not doing enough to be responsive in the "technology space."

Administrators are seeking a path forward with a model that was "high tech and high touch." Sam emphasized that:

> Keeping up with cutting edge technology is essential. But, I still think for Extension to work, it's based on relationships, and I still think we need to be sure that we value those one-on-one relationships built through Cooperative Extension Service, particularly for youth education programs. So, I think there's going to need to be a balance there. We are going to have to be high-tech and high-touch.

Relationship-based means having an in-person relationship or connection between the Extension staff and the learner. Sam reiterates what Elizabeth and Joseph were conveying that in-person relationships are imperative to Extension work because virtual education is not the same.

### Urbanization

Administrators perceived that rural communities are shrinking while urban populations continue to increase and concentrate. Carolyn added more context about the urbanization that her state is experiencing, explaining that:

> [We have] 80-something counties that are losing population, [and] we have about 8 counties that [have] population growth…so that's where the population is. So that's also a threat, because as you pack more and more people in there, how do we serve more and more people in those areas? Also, we now have folks who feel like they are left behind and we ne need to serve those folks too.

Urbanization is a recognized threat for State Extension administrators across the country, from the most rural Western states to the most urbanized East Coast states. Urbanization challenges Extension on many different levels: First, the citizens living in urban areas are disconnected from production agriculture; second, cities are so large that it is hard to make an impact with the level of staffing, and at the same time, there is greater service provider competition. If these challenges were insufficient, the current Extension and employee pipeline may not be prepared to serve these audiences. All of this contributes to a changing political landscape.

## *Power shifts*

Shifts in population and population needs will inevitably result in changing political alliances and power. With the population shifts, administrators recognized that potential funding and support changes would result from an increase in the number of urban legislators. As potential funding and programming shifts to serve a growing urban population, stress will be placed on the historical relationships with organizations who work to secure support for Extension and the program's historical clients. There is a need for an educational strategy for legislators who may not have experiential knowledge of the Extension program, either as a client or 4-H member.

### *Long-standing organizational relationships*

Extension has long-standing relationships with agriculture and rural organizations. These relationships are important for political reasons and as working educational partnerships, with commodity groups relaying feedback about programming. In the context of urbanization, these strong relationships may not consider the need to change programming in urban settings. Even if they do consider the need for Extension to expand, they do not want their clientele to lose services. The organizations still have political power and can mobilize their clientele for or against Extension.

### *Stakeholders are fearful of loss*

Stakeholders are fearful of losing opportunities and resources. David said, "Sometimes when you try to move in new directions, you find opposition from current audiences." The current audiences of rural and agricultural organizations are concerned about their status. Sarah captured that Extension's clients are:

> . . . really passionate folks, that really come to the table to rally; they really value Extension and want to make sure that the things they know and love about Extension [continue]; and again, some of this goes back to 4-H, so they are pretty loud, loud and clear.

These historic audiences are not just agriculture commodity groups, but also 4-H parents, volunteers, and Master Gardeners, and the list of stakeholders is not limited to these specific identified organizations. The stakeholders' passion for the organization is rooted in what it provides them, and they care deeply about the positive benefits they have experienced or see others receiving. Thus, from that passion, those stakeholders who will "rally for a budget cut at the state legislature" can be loud when they perceive that the organization is shifting away from their "special interests."

### *Opportunities in the urban landscape*

While urbanization is seen by stakeholders as a significant threat with many factors, urban populations are always viewed as "opportunities." Robert shared "Saying that we need to increase that urban presence and look at how we approach those audiences differently is not saying that we're doing things wrong in other aspects. [Urban communities] are really where [the] opportunities are."

Additionally, Curt saw an opportunity to bring the historic strength of agricultural education to the urban context. He emphasized that when he said "I think there's phenomenal

opportunity in this urban interface of folks who are concerned about where their food comes from." He showcased the need for continued agricultural and environmental literacy, emphasizing Extension's historical strength and matching it with citizens' interest in "food." To serve urban populations, administrators have turned to municipalities to provide funding for staff. Administrators relayed success with having county administrators fund more paraprofessionals to deliver the content in more communities. This was highlighted as a fairly "easy" sell because an Extension budget request is tiny compared to the entirety of a large urban county's budget.

### *Shrinking Rural Communities*

Since Extension was founded as an agricultural improvement organization that has focused on rural community and human capacity development, it is understandable that rural people, spaces, and economies have been its strength. Urbanization has resulted in shrinking rural communities, with a reduction in economic vibrancy and viability as young people have moved away. While at first glance these are opportunities for Extension, they have also become threats. As the need for Extension's programming is increasing in rural communities, the ability for rural counties to fund Extension is decreasing.

With brain drain (Carr & Kefalas, 2009), a challenge has emerged for Extension: how to replace retiring county-based staff in rural communities. Carolyn shared that it has been challenging to find qualified Extension professional candidates in rural communities. She said "we really struggle to find strong applicant pools for agents in… rural areas." The barrier to recruitment was not salary but the availability of qualified individuals willing to stay and work in those communities.

Administrators shared that their institutions were feeling pressure to seek higher rankings. As a result, these institutions have sought more competitive applicant pools. Therefore, they relayed it has become increasingly challenging for rural youth to gain entry to LGUs. Because it is harder to get into the state's LGU, administrators noted there were fewer qualified individuals who want to "return home" to their rural communities. Thus, causing it to be harder and harder to fill vacancies for Extension professionals in rural, small, or remote communities.

### Diversity in Our Communities

Each administrator expressed the need for Extension to serve the entire public. Administrators expressed specific considerations on inclusion efforts for Hispanic/Latino populations, English as a Second Language (ESL) individuals, African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, refugee populations, and LGBTQ+ individuals.

All twenty study participants expressed a need to continue working toward representative parity between state demographics and clientele. Sam candidly shared this about his state:

> When I run the demographics for [my state], we still disproportionately have more Caucasian white, you know, white folks, and… if you compare that to our state demographics, and we do very well on the Hispanic, but [this state] is primarily a majority Hispanic population… We are still falling short on [serving] our tribal native American [youth].

Each state is at different levels of response to changing ethnic and racial demographics; however, the consistent response indicated a need to systematize their response and to be intentional. One regularly suggested institutional response was for there to be more diversity in staff.

At the same time, all the administrators saw glimpses of effort toward demographically representative service. The intentionality of the effort is recognized as being essential for forward progress. Using in-organization individuals/families of underserved populations to speak about their experiences allows for a little bit of that support to be done by people who allow the target population to say, "Those individuals look like me, talk like me, and are in my communities." It is powerful to note that Rhonda recognizes this approach has been made historically to serve white rural audiences and now needs to be done for all other audiences. Engaging audiences in a dialogue is important to understand how they want to experience Extension.

## The Mission Remains Agriculture

State Extension administrators are committed to continuing agricultural educational programming for adult agriculture producers, youth through 4-H, and community members through Master Gardeners. Callie framed the task for Extension to remain committed to agriculture programming:

> I think it's very important to provide agricultural programming, from the standpoint of healthy living and nutrition, from the standpoint of community food security, [and] from the standpoint of agriculture production here in the U. S., I think it really is. It's important that we grow our food locally. So, yeah, I think it's very important because . . . it's also our roots . . . If we deviate from what we are because we're trying to stay relevant and cool and hip, [we may experience mission creep]. Thankfully there's a lot of ways to make agriculture cool and hip nowadays, which is also who we are . . . what we're founded [on], but it can't be the only thing we do.

This commitment is predicated on the idea that agriculture is a primary industry for the states because it is the organization's historic work in this area and because of leaders' inborn commitment to the agriculture industry. Administrators see opportunities to expand agricultural literacy through programs framed around food, nutrition, and health, and they see a chance to make significant impacts on communities and make Extension more relevant to the broader society by framing their work as "health" rather than simply agricultural production.

## Shifting Focus Friction: Theory of Pushback for Cooperative Extension Adaptation

Each State Extension Administrator talked about environmental factors in the context of stakeholder pushback. This pushback was coded into power shifts, stakeholders fearful of loss, and long-standing relationships. These codes were grouped into a theme of *shifting focus friction*, which is the backlash from important stakeholders in response to organizational changes when there is either an actual loss or a perceived loss of resources to another focus (Figure 3). This theme was re-coded according to Charmaz's (2014) grounded theory methodological recommendation of

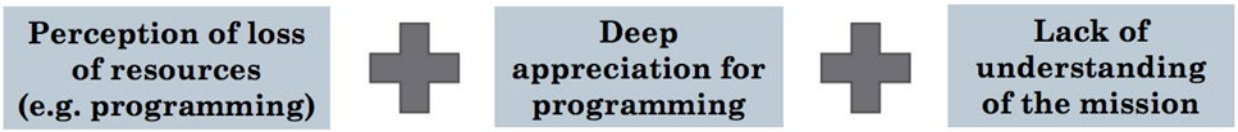
axial coding. This coding resulted in a causal description of shifting focus friction as a theory of pushback to Cooperative Extension adaptation.

The pushback, or shifting focus friction, are the behaviors by individuals or organizations intended to prevent organizational change by Cooperative Extension, without regard for the Cooperative Extensions success in any other way. The aim of this pushback is to preserve the current services that are being received. Individuals, who are invested clientele or those within the organization who are non-adopters of the program change, can demonstrate these behaviors. Extension audiences will use their relationships and connections to try and ensure that shifts in the organization's mission do not occur, unless their special interest is preserved. Examples of pushback that administrators relayed included negative social media campaigns, personal attacks on administrators (i.e., threatening talking to supervisors about getting individuals fired, or bringing concerns to elected officials), campaigns toward legislators (i.e., letter writing campaigns and getting groups of volunteers to organize), and communicating with university administrators (i.e., writing to Board of Regents, Presidents, and direct supervisors). These pushback behaviors end up causing harm to the organization.

Shifting focus friction (see Figure 3) is a result from three factors. Each are required to generate enough motivation by stakeholders to demonstrate this behavior. First, individuals or organizations are experiencing real stress from a real or perceived loss of Extension services. Second, this perception of loss is then paired with a deep appreciation for the services that they or their group has experienced from Extension. And, then third, stakeholders demonstrating SFF have a lack of understanding about the entire organization's mission, making them focused on preserving the services they utilize and appreciate.

**Figure 3**

*Cause of Shifting Focus Friction*




*Note.* Adapted from "A Case of Shifting Focus Friction: Extension Directors and State 4-H Program Leaders' Perspectives on 4-H LGBTQ+ Inclusion," by J. Elliott-Engel, D. M. Westfall-Rudd, E. Kaufman et al., 2021, *The Journal of Extension, 59*(4), Article 14 (https://doi.org/10.34068/joe.59.04.14). Copyright 2021 by Clemson University Press, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

## Discussion and Implications

This study found administrators are attuned to many environmental factors, both internal and external. Administrators' attention to these factors reflected the literature's emphasis on racial and ethnic diversity changes; urbanization, the change in the public's understanding of public value and the resulting emphasis on impacts; and that technology changes how the Extension programming is conducted. In addition, they highlighted other factors, including (1) that the mission should be reframed toward health, (2) that there is still a need for Extension in rural communities, and (3) that the Extension employee pipeline needs attention. Administrators

recognized that the organization's response to the environmental factors has produced shifting focus friction.

Extension is relevant and will remain focused on agriculture. Despite the debate in the literature about the future of Extension (e.g., Hoag, 2005; Ward et al., 2009) or the relevance of Extension as an agriculture organization (e.g., Bull et al., 2004), administrators resoundingly rebuked Extension's extinction (e.g., Ward et al., 2009). They were committed to Extension as an organization that has and will remain rooted as an agriculture organization.

The change in the U.S. public's understanding of public value has led to the contract now asking: What is the value that is received for the dollar invested? What is the return on investment? And, should the public dollar be invested in this program compared to any other given program? Evidence to justify Extension's mission will continue to grow in importance (Elliott-Engel et al., 2020).

Extension has an opportunity to reframe as a health organization but must remain committed to agricultural programming. Administrators suggested the need to reframe agriculture programming as a continuum of agriculture as food, as health, and even as a community. This perspective is not new, as Extension has been providing programming on agriculture production and food since its inception (Rogers, 1988). Yet, framing the mission expansively and inclusively as a way to improve and contribute to health, is a new way to communicate the entire endeavor of Extension efforts (i.e., Buys & Rennenkamp, 2020; Strayer et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2018). Administrators specifically focused on how to ensure health production, food, and people in mind and body—all of which they saw as ways to achieve healthy communities.

Smith-Lever Capacity Grant Funds administered through USDA-NIFA's federal budget are stagnant. Unified efforts to increase Smith-Lever Capacity Grant Funds to ensure future organizational stability were strongly recommended by administrators. The effort must be a concerted campaign of the LGU systems and their partners to communicate the organizational value and mission to federal, state, and local legislators and government agencies. Additionally, Extension is no longer solely a rural community education program and, therefore should seek partnerships across the federal government.

Developing strong relationships with legislators and being armed with relevant outcome data were recognized as the two aspects that could help stabilize state and county budgets. It is interesting to note that the administrators' ability to have two-way conversations with legislators and county-commissioners was considered important so that programming could be responsive to the needs of the representatives and thus could be on the mind of funders when there was a funding initiative.

County-level budgets will continue to become increasingly disparate, with rural communities experiencing downward pressures on both legislatively appropriated or direct tax-levied budgets as rural communities shrink. To continue to be relevant in Extension's historically strong programming communities and areas, there will need to be pressure to increase urban funding to allow other state or federal funds to be used in shrinking or economically disadvantaged communities.

Rural communities have a growing need for Extension services. Administrators recognized the flip side of urbanization was the shrinking and aging rural communities left behind (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Henderson & Akers, 2009). As the needs increase in rural communities, the local capacity to fund the organization shrinks. This dilemma creates a unique pressure on Extension to urbanize. However, Extension has a long-term relationship and a commitment to rural communities (Rogers, 1988; Wessel & Wessel, 1982); therefore, it is imperative to sustain service in rural communities and increase funding in urban communities to continue to serve both traditional and expand new audiences.

Administrators recognize urbanization as *the* challenge for Extension (Fox et al., 2017; Hains et al., 2021): the tension between shrinking rural communities where they have a strong base of support and large-population communities that are unknown territory. In urban communities, State Extension administrators recognized a high concentration of competition for financial resources and clientele. Additionally, administrators consistently realized that the county unit scale is daunting for servicing urban communities.

Shrinking rural communities will erode political support for rural-only organizations, and serving all people is part of Extension's public service mission. Urban counties and municipalities have stronger tax bases. The implications for Extension working in urban environments is that it will need to market itself to gain market traction at the same level has earned over a century of providing services in rural communities. The staffing scale needs to reflect the community integration levels that can be achieved in rural communities.

Administrators recognized their mission mandate to serve the representative populations in their state. Significant work still needs to be done to help diverse audiences in both urban and rural communities. Administrators communicated their understanding that an intentional effort must be made to develop programs that target under-served populations. For example, efforts to modify existing curriculum for diverse communities were acknowledged (e.g., translating curriculum).

## Organization Environmental Change

The Nadler-Tushman Congruence Model for Diagnosing Organizational Behavior views an organization as an open system, and acknowledges that inputs influence organizational adaptation (Nadler & Tushman, 1977, 1980). In this model, the inputs are viewed as relatively fixed, yet they help influence how the people in the organization behave by serving as constraints or opportunities for action (Burke, 2014). Nadler and Tushman (1977, 1980) identified three inputs: the environment, resources, and history, which lead to strategy.

Extension's environment has continued to become more complex, with changing funding streams, bigger communities, more diverse target populations, and more breadth in programming. As Burns and Stalker (2015) discuss, organizational stability or instability significantly affects the organization's internal operations, structures, and policies. For Extension, the complexity and the greater amount of environmental instability and complexity have threatened the Extension system. And, it has created even more need for the organization to be responsive to changing community needs.

Extension has a deep history that has determined patterns of employee behavior, policy, and the types of people an organization attracts as clients. The organizational environment, the resources available, and history converge to influence the strategy that is implemented by a leader (Burke, 2014). Additionally, as demographic changes occur causing rural-urban power shifts and stakeholders fear of loss State Extension administrators must recognize the need to be responsive to historic stakeholders and prepare them for the organizations need to adapt. A focus on reducing the perception or real loss will be needed to maintain and grow available resources for the organization and for the current and future stakeholders.

## Leadership Implications

*Shifting focus friction* results from Extension leadership's failure to prepare their clientele for organizational change. Administrators emphasized the need for relationship building to prepare clientele for change at the individual and organizational levels (Caillouet & Harder, 2021). Constant communication and relationship-building help advance efforts to bring clientele into the bigger mission of the organization (i.e., create a shared vision). When there is constant communication, the administrator creates a *holding environment* (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017), which can lead to successful organizational adaptation. If a state's Extension program is experiencing shifting focus friction, administrators have not created a shared vision with clientele or ensured a mutually shared commitment to the future of the organization. Adaptive leadership could provide a heuristic for State Extension Administrators to build consensus to allow the organization to achieve adaptation (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). The more the organizational system can remain adaptable and pliable, the more the organization will be able to stay viable, relevant, and effective in meeting the organizational mission and the needs of the citizens instead of the needs of a select few.

## Call for Further Research

This is the first attempt to collect data from Extension administrators from a multi-state perspective, however, we acknowledge there is more work to be done. Further work is needed to explore administrator perspectives from leadership in all Extension areas of foci not included in this work— e.g., Agriculture, Natural Resources, Family and Consumer Sciences, and Community Development Additionally, this research explores the U.S. 1862 LGU Extension leadership and further exploration and comparison with U.S. 1890 and 1994 leadership and international Extension leadership is warranted.

Shifting focus friction is a new theory of pushback to Cooperative Extension adaptation. This theory should be explored through case study of specific issues within Cooperative Extension. For example, is shifting focus friction experienced equally when Extension Administrators are making programmatic or organizational changes? Are there cases of successful navigation of Cooperative Extension adaptation that has prevented, or worked through, shifting focus friction demonstrated by stakeholders that can inform administrator praxis?

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