

ABSTRACT

BLEVINS, MARK W. North Carolina County Commissioner Perceptions of Cooperative Extension: Implications for County Based Programs on Performance, Communication, and Evaluation. (Under the direction of Dr. K. S. U. Jayaratne).

This descriptive correlational study investigated the perceptions of North Carolina County Commissioners regarding Extension, the evaluation criteria County Commissioners use for programs, and the communication methods they prefer. The survey instrument was sent to the entire population of 586 Commissioners and received 185 responses (32%).

Results indicated that Commissioners agreed most strongly that Extension adds value to their community, makes positive impacts, is an effective organization, and aligns with their County goals/vision. In order to enhance these performance perceptions, Extension must share the evaluation information that is most important to the Commissioners. They value cost savings or increased earnings of clients, economic impacts, knowledge and skills gained by clients, how underserved clients are receiving services, and environmental impacts of programs. Commissioners indicated the highest preference for receiving this information through personal contact with Extension staff, feedback directly from citizens, annual presentations/reports to the people, and electronic newsletters or reports.

The variables in the survey instrument were analyzed for correlations. Findings indicated that Commissioners who consider agriculture to be more important in their local economy are more likely to have a higher overall perception of Extension, probably more involved in Extension activities, and likely to serve more rural constituents.

Commissioners also shared suggestions for improving the relationship between Cooperative Extension and County government. Themes from the 80 comments were to improve communication with the Commissioners, maintain strong existing relationships, increase

marketing efforts with the public, collaborate more with local departments and agencies, and address funding and staffing concerns with the state.

Extension should take advantage of this situation and these opportunities revealed by this study by conducting similar research at the local level to compare and tailor the results. Program evaluation must include economic indicators and behavior change data. Local annual plans of work should require an annual report to the Commissioners to be determined at the local level, and training must be conducted with staff and volunteers to better equip them to personally share the data Commissioners need in order to make well-informed decisions about Cooperative Extension.

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North Carolina County Commissioner Perceptions of Cooperative Extension:
Implications for County Based Programs on Performance,
Communication, and Evaluation

by
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DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to the Cooperative Extension system globally and the dedicated professionals who connect research discoveries to those who put them into practice. Specifically and especially in North Carolina, the dedication is directed to County Extension Directors who invest the effort to communicate Cooperative Extension outcomes and impacts to key stakeholders, and the County Commissioners who already do, and those who soon will, offer their support for the ongoing work of improving the lives, the land, and the families of this great state.

BIOGRAPHY

Mark Wilson Blevins was born to parents Jim and Jackie who were married in 1965. He grew up in Salemburg, a small, one-stoplight town in eastern North Carolina where his early employers included a produce farm, hardware store, and Boy Scout camp. Blevins earned his Eagle Scout Award, attended Lakewood High School and graduated from the NC School of Science and Mathematics before studying Engineering at NC State University.

Partway through college, Blevins re-evaluated his life goals and knew he wanted to be outside and help people, so he thought back to how his father would call the Extension office for all kinds of reasons from vegetable garden problems and growing worms to canning instructions and laundry stains. That's when he changed majors to Extension Education and pursued a Master's degree in the same. Along the way he worked as a Resident Advisor and Residence Director on campus and served during the summers in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park with A Christian Ministry in the National Parks on the weekends and worked for varying durations at Anthony's Pizzeria, Performance Automotive, and even the JC Raulston Arboretum.

Anna Slivensky of Hickory, NC became his bride in the summer of 2013. They have three daughters – one by adoption – and have lived in Raleigh, Hickory, Gastonia, Leland, Oak Island, and Southport, North Carolina. She is an incredible wife, an amazing mother, and a woman of noble character. Anna's support, encouragement, and persistence made the difference in this researcher's academic life and otherwise.

Blevins's Extension career includes serving gardeners, farmers, and the community as an intern on the Qualla Boundary, a Horticulture Agent in Gaston County, and as the Brunswick County Extension Director. He is grateful for the support of colleagues and clients as he worked to make a difference in beekeeping, direct marketing of produce, pesticide safety, and the

professional development of others. This focus on professional development led him to serve in state and national committees in the National Association of County Agricultural Agents and as the state and national president of Epsilon Sigma Phi, a professional development association for all Extension professionals.

Mark Blevins looks forward to further and greater service to the people of Brunswick County and North Carolina as he continues to bring the discoveries of University researchers from across the country to the people who can put them into practical applications in his community.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

MY WIFE! A truly remarkable woman, Anna Slivensky Blevins pushed and prodded me through a decade of course work and research to get to this point. She ran me off to study, woke me up to keep writing, and read loads of material to help me along the way. Readers who find someone remotely as special to them as my wife is to me are encouraged to do everything in their power to keep them close at heart, treasure them always, and bear one another's burdens through thick and thin.

Our daughters, also, exhibited patient perseverance through this process. Madeline and Audrey weren't even born when I took my first course in this program, and Kayla came into our home during the writing phase toward what I initially thought was the end. They didn't choose the challenges they experienced because of what I got myself into, but they made the most of it, and seem to be doing their homework and schoolwork fastidiously – hopefully making quicker work of their academic careers. I am grateful to be a part of their growth, development and success as amazing women.

I am also quite grateful to my Doctoral Committee, especially my Chair, Dr. Jay Jayaratne whose encouragement and support made this possible. Drs. Marshall Stewart and Mark Kistler are appreciated for their service on my committee prior to departing NC State for larger roles in Missouri and Georgia, respectively. Dr. Bruce's standards of excellence and use of metaphors improved my writing significantly. Dr. Downing helped me maintain clarity and Dr. Bradley was always so positive and encouraging with a dose of keeping me on task.

Thank you, North Carolina County Commissioners, especially those in Brunswick County who, along with administrative leaders, supported this academic endeavor in many ways.

Forever will I be indebted to the staff in Southeastern NC whom I have the privilege to work with on a daily or otherwise regular basis and who have been persistent with their strengths and needs amid my occasional seclusion to work on this study. Keith was great, Michelle was amazing, Sam and the Morgans covered for me countless times at meetings and events, Cynda was invaluable, Gina's design skills are fabulous, Dr. McKee's insight and support made the difference – especially at the end, and the entire staff is such a joy to work with as we serve our community.

My confession, frustrating reality, and personal prayer through much of this study was that I am completely unable to do this, or much else for that matter, on my own and for my own sake. Oswald Chambers, a YMCA chaplain in World War I, inspired me on several occasions during this research. A truncated quote is provided as literary bait for interested readers to investigate more in the works of Chambers and the works to which he refers often. In reference to public discourse, preparation, and delivery he says, “never rely on the clearness of your exposition, but as you give your exposition see that you are relying on...” (Chambers, 1965 p338). The reader is encouraged to explore the remaining portion of this quote or contact the researcher for additional information.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the context of this study, performance perceptions are based on a decision-maker's past experiences and the input they receive about a program through various methods of communication. The relationship between Cooperative Extension and County Commissioners is an extremely valuable one and is certainly worthwhile to study. If Cooperative Extension can, as an organization – and especially at the local level, build on County Commissioners' past involvement in programs and share the information they need through methods of communication they prefer, Commissioners will be better informed to assess performance and make well-informed decisions about Cooperative Extension.

This chapter introduces the subject and describes the relationship between Cooperative Extension and County Commissioners to explain the need for such a study. The mission of Cooperative Extension - and the Land Grant Universities - revolves around meeting needs in communities with research-based information (Shore & Caldwell, 1998). Extension is a partnership between federal, state, and local governments; in North Carolina the local government component consists of the support from the Counties. County Commissioners are critically important to this partnership since they make the final decisions on funding and functions in the County (NC Center for County Research, 2014).

This study researches how a County Commissioner's appraisal of programs relates to their perception of Extension performance through information from clients and staff of Extension by different means of communication as well as their experiences with the organization. The ideas above are explained and referenced in the following background and need for the study.

Background

Understanding the perceptions of County Commissioners regarding Cooperative Extension is critical for the organization to maintain and grow its relevance in the 21st century. Established in 1914 by the Smith Lever Act, this national educational partnership between federal, state, and local governments focuses on “providing people with learning opportunities that allow them to benefit from research-based knowledge” (Shore & Caldwell, 1998, p. 3). Extension is known as a non-formal education system that takes “the teachings of the college and the research of the experiment stations directly into the rural areas for the benefit of the people there” (Hightower, 1973, p. 13).

Even before the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, Extension work was being conducted throughout the states and territories of the nation and it was overwhelmingly county-based. Alfred True’s account of early Extension history tells how “the county-agent work developed under different auspices and organizations” (1928, p. 76) such as Associations, Farmers Cooperatives, State Departments of Agriculture, Chambers of Commerce, Boards of Trade, and Private Industry (railroads, banks, etc.). Regional events and research were a part of early 20th century efforts, but the majority of education in Extension’s first decades was based in the county. This local basis was solidified as initiating legislation was put into practice.

Extension was a local and grassroots organization from the start. Of the 2,701 Extension employees on record during the inaugural years of the Smith-Lever Act, only 698 (27%) worked on research stations or lectured on campus; at least 1,569 were local County Agents (p.126-7). The different subject matter specialties of these early agents are as follows:

When the Smith-Lever Act went into effect somewhat over 30 per cent of the agricultural counties had a county agricultural agent, and about 10 per cent had a county home-

demonstration agent. On June 30, 1919, over 75 per cent of the counties had a county agricultural agent, and 35 per cent had a county home demonstration agent.” (True, 1928, p. 151).

Today, Cooperative Extension in North Carolina “has offices in every county of North Carolina and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. The staff and volunteers work with local government to support agriculture, horticulture, conservation and environmental protection, nutrition and health, as well as a variety of consumer, youth, and economic concerns” (NC State Extension, 2019). A state match to federal funds are both channeled through the Land Grant Universities in the state – NC State University and NC A&T State University. These funds provide two of the three components to the Extension partnership.

County governments are the local component. Each of North Carolina’s 100 Counties is governed by a board of five to nine County Commissioners selected in a general election. The board sets the county property tax rate and adopts an annual, balanced budget. The Commissioners also establish county policy by adopting resolutions and ordinances (NC Center for County Research, 2014).

All Counties in North Carolina use a council-manager form of government. The commissioners focus on county policies and hire a manager and administrative staff to oversee the day-to-day operations of the County government (NC Center for County Research 2014). Administratively, Cooperative Extension units operate and report through or as a County department to the County Manager. The County Commissioners have the final say on budgetary and programmatic decisions at the County level.

Halfway through Extension’s history, White (1965) was the first to publish a study investigating the relationship between Cooperative Extension and County Commissioners in

North Carolina. She researched perceptions of County Commissioners towards Extension in the northeastern portion of North Carolina. The 85 participants from 18 counties in that administrative district were mostly (53%) rural farm residents who farmed (47%) or ran a business that directly or indirectly served farmers (42%). Three out of five felt that “teaching underlying principles of farming and homemaking” (60%) was the most important function to be performed by Extension Agents, while “providing information on specific farm and home problems” ranked second. This shows that farm and rural programming was the top priority for that part of the state at the time. Many things have changed in the 55 years that followed and perhaps the rank of importance of program topics is one of the changes.

At that point in North Carolina’s history North Carolina was a very different place. The state’s population was 4.6M with only 1.8M in urban areas; the majority of North Carolinians lived in rural communities (Census Bureau, 1990). And the 1964 Census of Agriculture counted 148,202 farms in the state.

According to Renkow, “the 1960s marked the final decade in a long historical pattern of out-migration from rural North Carolina, both to urban centers within the state as well as to locations in other states” (2000, p. 1). The state has changed significantly over the last half-century now with 80 counties considered rural and six as urban – with a population density greater than 750 per square mile (Rural Center, 2015); the 14 counties that were suburban or held a regionally important city are classified as neither urban nor rural in these measures as long as they fall below the urban population density threshold. The state’s population at the last census was 9.5M with 6.2M considered urban (Census Bureau, 2010).

Cooperative Extension and the North Carolina Counties they serve have a rich history. So much has changed in the time since a subset of County Commissioners were surveyed about

their perceptions of Cooperative Extension in North Carolina. Now that Extension is in its second century of service, a check-in with valuable local decision-makers could help strengthen the relationship between the two. So while asking about strengthening the relationship, one might be so bold as to open a dialogue about how best to communicate, as well as how these local officials perceive Extension's performance and how they come to such a conclusion.

Need for the Study

No study has ever been recorded or reported regarding North Carolina County Commissioners and their perceptions of Extension since Estelle White's research in 1965. Furthermore, a statewide study has yet to be found in the literature. This study sought to fill the gap in research so that Extension can get the information Commissioners want in ways that effectively reach them. When this occurs, Commissioners' appraisal of local efforts could perhaps be more positive and more robust, so they can make better-informed decisions about Extension programs.

Cooperative Extension works hard to address needs in the Counties and in local communities. Its mission statement is, "NC State Extension helps create prosperity for North Carolina through programs and partnerships focused on agriculture and food, health and nutrition, and 4-H youth development" (NC State Extension, 2019, Mission). These programs and partnerships are based on local needs. The first step in delivering "research-based solutions to local issues" is to "identify local needs and challenges" (NC State Extension, 2019, Cycle of Solutions).

The relationships that make Cooperative Extension so cooperative are on display daily in the local offices where decisions made by the federal, state, and local governments play out in the programs and personnel of this national system of non-formal education. Alfred True

described this relationship in 1930 when he wrote, “county extension agents are peculiarly representatives of the state agricultural college and the federal Department of Agriculture” (p. 11). This is still true today as these three layers provide guidance, oversight, and funding for Cooperative Extension in every County of North Carolina (NC State Extension, 2019) and every state in the nation as well as U.S. Territories (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2014). Decision makers at every level of government are important stakeholders for the organization because of the structured relationship between local, state, and national partners.

The local partnership is critically important for the Cooperative Extension County Center to succeed. Boasting a \$299.2M annual economic impact on North Carolina in addition to \$17.1M value in hours worked by volunteers, Cooperative Extension claims a 7-to-1 economic return on the state government’s annual investment in Extension (\$41.9M). Counties invest \$30.6M, with grants and gifts provide \$25.4M with the federal portion rounding out the mix with \$9.2 M (NC State Extension, 2018). On a local level, this mixture of funding provides plenty of specialist support from campus and roughly half of the salaries for County based educators. The remainder of salaries, facilities, and all operating funds come from the County investment.

County government administration authorities manage the funding and oversee Extension units. Organizational accountability with County management, County Commissioners, and every group of stakeholders, is fundamental to the continuing success and sustainability of Cooperative Extension. In a study of quality characteristics for local offices, Terry (2009) surveyed Extension staff and County Managers in Florida as well as state Extension Directors across the country. The 128 subjects determined several best management practices for Extension. One major finding regarding the local level partnership was that “well-developed educational programs in exemplary County extension offices ensure educational programs are

consistent with county priorities” (p. 159). The alignment of priorities between Cooperative Extension and the Counties where they operate is an important measure of success for the local office according to both sides of the relationship.

County administrators and County Commissioners are key leaders locally. According to Cooper and Graham’s (2001) study of Arkansas County-based agents and supervisors, several key relationships must be maintained by staff in leadership positions to have an effective local office. That study identified someone’s ability to work in teams and with key leaders as the most important two competencies for county supervisors to be effective. Understanding that working with key leaders is important for effectiveness, the specific content of the contact and communication with key leaders is a focus of the study at hand.

Support from County management is important, but County Commissioners have the final say so in funding and policy decisions. Fombrun (1996) found that organizational reputation is based on perceptions of four major stakeholder groups: customers, the community, investors, and employees. These perceptions are based on the corporate identity an organization presents to the public at large and in interactions with individuals, “the key point, of course, is that reputation consists of perceptions – how others see you,” (p. 37). People base their impressions, according to Fombrun, on four expectations for these stakeholders: “reliability for customers, credibility for investors, trustworthiness for employees, and responsibility for communities” (p. 72). As it relates to Cooperative Extension, Fombrun’s investors are North Carolina’s County Commissioners, state legislators, and others. Based on his findings, an Extension office’s relationships with these key stakeholders must be diligently developed and maintained in order to foster their confidence in funding Extension programs.

The appraisal and perception of County Commissioners and other decision-makers can determine their verdicts about local Extension programming. In a study of Maryland Legislators' perception of Extension, Adkins (1980) wrote, "it is critical to the future of Extension that these decision-makers have a knowledge and understanding of the Cooperative Extension Service as a basis for their decisions" (p. 3). This study further indicated that where a legislator lived mattered more for perception than one's other demographic characteristics. In other words, the geographic region represented (rural) and place of residence (farm and rural areas) were the factors most correlated with a positive perception of Extension.

Consistent communication and strong relationships foster success. Surls (2008) studied County-level performance in the Cooperative Extension system nationwide and found that, County directors who perceive that they have a strong partnership with county government are most likely to oversee thriving extension offices. The strength of this partnership is closely associated with access to county officials, and building relationships with those officials. (p. 5)

Of the 370 County Extension Directors responding from across the country, Surls (2008) found that 97% receive funding from county budgets and are highly likely to have a memorandum of understanding which has been revisited with the local government entity in the last half-decade. Also, a positive correlation was found between Extension offices facing budget cuts and those County Extension Directors who had less access to county officials and who lacked an advisory council; increasing budgets were associated with Directors who had better access to officials, an advisory board, and a longer tenure in their administrative role. Relationships with local government are obviously important and impactful since respondents who believed they have a strong partnership with local government are more likely to have a

relationship or at least access to local elected officials, and strong financial and other support from their county (Surls, 2008).

These studies show that the relationship between County Commissioners and Cooperative Extension is a very important one. Extension focuses on meeting needs at the local level in agriculture, youth development, and nutrition as part of a local, state, and national partnership through the Land Grant system. The local partnership is critically important for success with County government, especially Commissioners, making decisions on funding and policy. These decisions are based, in part, on perceptions of Cooperative Extension program performance and impacts. If these perceptions are influenced by the information they receive, then determining ways to improve communication with these important stakeholders is a worthwhile research endeavor.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine county commissioner perceptions of Extension performance, their preferred communication methods, and evaluation criteria for determining the effectiveness of Cooperative Extension. More specifically this study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. Determine the demographic characteristics of County Commissioners and their counties.
2. Determine County Commissioners' perceptions about the performance of Cooperative Extension.
3. Determine County Commissioners' communication preferences in receiving information about Extension's impacts and efforts

4. Identify the evaluation criteria used by County Commissioners to determine the effectiveness of Extension.
5. Determine whether there is any correlation between County Commissioners' perceptions about the performance of Cooperative Extension and their demographic variables.
6. Determine suggestions made by County Commissioners to build a stronger working relationship between Cooperative Extension and County Government.

Definition of Terms

County – North Carolina consists of 100 counties, which are “the level of government that most impacts each citizen. Counties exist to enhance the lives of their citizens” by providing access to needed services, establishing local ordinances, and enforcing laws (NC Center for County Research, 2014, p. 1). Each of these governmental units - and the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indian (EBCI) - is served by a local Extension Center (NC State Extension, 2019). As a result, for the purpose of this study, Counties, local units, and other similar designations refer to both Counties and the Federally recognized Tribe in North Carolina as local governing bodies with an Extension presence, unless otherwise specified. However, no survey responses were obtained from EBCI tribal leaders due to internal restrictions on survey data.

County Commissioners – Counties in North Carolina are governed by a small group of elected individuals comprising a County Commission with up to 9 members. This does not include municipal or other elected positions which have a less direct relationship with Cooperative Extension. Nor does this term include administrative employees such as County Managers or Clerks of County Commissions, even if elected or appointed (NC Center for County Research, 2014).

Extension Program – three major program areas exist in NC State Extension; they are agriculture, food, and youth. A program is a series of constructed and coordinated educational events aimed at addressing a need in the community and/or a state-identified objective to address concerns in North Carolina (NC State Extension, 2019). The performance or appraisal of which is based on outcomes and impacts as a result of effective programming.

Program Performance – Effectiveness of an educational program to meet the needs of the target audience. Bennett (1975) combined elements from other researchers to produce a hierarchy spanning a range of evidence for program performance from inputs, activities, participation, reactions, to knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations, then on to practice change, and end results.

Public Value – refers to the public good that is generated by public efforts. Cooperative Extension Programs address needs in food production and safety, family well-being, individual health, and youth development. An argument can be made that the whole population benefits to a certain degree when food is abundant, families are strong, individuals are healthy and youth become productive citizens. Many Extension Programs look to several aspects of Public Value. These include fairness and justice, inadequate information in the public, benefits for non-participants, non-exclusion of non-participants, and lower cost of production/education from existing organizations (Kalambokidis, 2004). This will be measured as a subset of what Local Elected Officials perceive as performance and effectiveness in Extension programs.

Rural, Suburban, Urban – The NC Rural Center (2015) categorized the 100 Counties of the state by population density into Rural (less than or equal to 250 people per square mile), Regional City and Suburban (between 250 and 750 people per square mile), and Urban (750

people per square mile and greater) classifications as depicted in Figure 1. The NC Rural Center calculated these groups based on 2014 US Census population estimates.

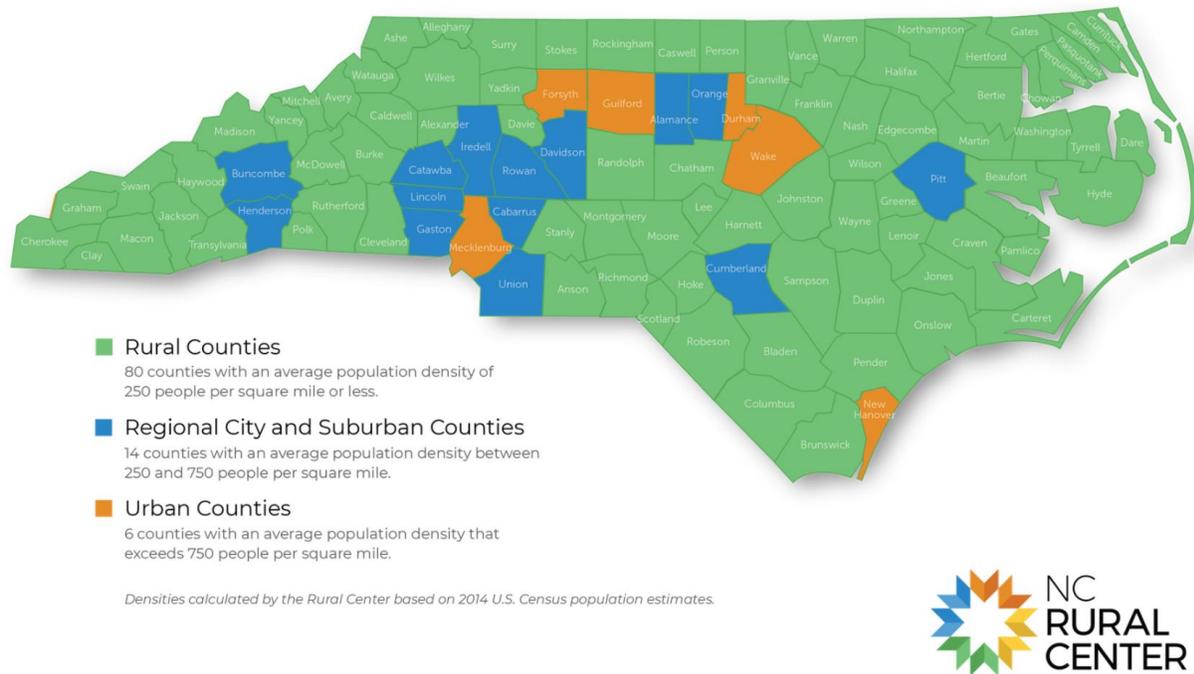


Figure 1. County classifications based on population density by the NC Rural Center (2015)

Assumptions

One of this study’s assumptions is that Local Elected Officials respond sincerely and accurately. Both of these factors seem obvious and appropriate, but not of equal ease with the latter possibly quite challenging for some. Remembering the wide variety of communication strategies for officials to engage with Extension may be difficult, especially in urban counties with large numbers of agency staff vying for a commissioner’s time.

Another assumption is that the officials will understand the purpose of the study as improving Extension’s value to the community and strengthening the linkages with local government rather than manipulating relationships with commissioners to gain influence over

local decisions. Every effort will be made to clearly state the purpose of the study and how the results will be communicated to avoid costly misunderstandings.

Limitations of the Study

Findings of this study are limited to North Carolina. The instrument can be used with permission for other similar purposes with other stakeholder groups or County leaders in other states.

Summary

This chapter began with an explanation of Cooperative Extension with a national historic perspective and a practical description in North Carolina based on its mission, functions, and current situation. A discussion of Counties, County government and their relationship to Extension set the stage for the need for this study. No statewide report of County Commissioner perceptions has been conducted in North Carolina, even though the local partnership is critical for Extension, especially with these local decision-makers. The purpose and six objectives of the study were depicted in addition to definitions of terms, as well as assumptions and limitations of the study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A body of research has developed around the perceptions of elected officials in relation to Extension programming over the last 50 years. Some studies occurred in Extension's early years, but about half of the material was published in the last ten years. No matter the decade, it has always been important to understand the perceptions of elected officials in relation to Extension programming, but the budget cuts at all levels in the recent past seem to have brought additional light to this topic as of late.

The review of the literature has been organized starting with a theoretical and conceptual framework for the study. Afterwards a chronology of related studies that include state legislators, and other decision-makers regarding their relationship with and perceptions of Cooperative Extension. Finally, a chronological progression of published works will be reviewed that is specific to County Commissioners.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is taken from a study of Michigan legislators in 1989 when Wahl said:

Experience influences a person's feelings, thoughts, and emotions. People interpret their experiences, forming them into perceptions. These perceptions serve as a way of organizing a person's future experience. People do not act or behave according to an objective set of facts; rather, they act according to how they have interpreted those facts or experiences. What drives decision making, what drives behavior, then, are the personal meanings or perceptions people have formed regarding their experiences (p. 82).

Perception is central to this framework. The classical theories of perception relate how humans receive, interpret, and learn sensory input such as light, touch, taste, and sound to understand and interact with their surroundings in order to interpret shape, distance, motion, voices, and the meaning of speech. Space perception introduces the processes of how the brain determines three-dimensional attributes as cues from the two-dimensional aspect of light received by the eye's optical array, while modern sensory physiology relates complex perceptions to intricate connections in the sensory structures themselves (Corsini & Auerbach, 1996).

Psychologically, perception “refers both to the experience of gaining sensory information about the world of people, things, and events, and to the psychological processes by which this is accomplished” (Corsini & Auerbach 1996, p. 660). Perception relates to sensory input in that sensing is the experience or feeling resulting from exciting the sensory receptors, while perceiving is the interpretation of a sensory experience “with reference to its presumed external stimulus object or event” (Coleman, 2001, p. 543).

Related theories build on this subject and are taken from the work of Corsini & Auerbach (1996). Perceptual transactionalism demonstrates that “perception is guided by past experience, assumptions of the perceiver, and individual differences from past experience” (p. 665). The theory of information-processing “concerns how people attend to, select, and internalize information, and how they later use it to make decisions and guide their behavior” (p. 473).

To summarize, Wahl described how people act according to their interpretation, or perception, of experiences and input. Psychological perception is based on past experiences and external input. Related theories revealed how people are selective as to the input they internalize for decision-making. Just as perceptions are based on sensory inputs, program outcomes are

based on educational inputs. Perceivers are affected by their assumptions, their circumstances, and their past. Behavior and decisions, therefore, are guided by internalized information, and Commissioner decisions about Cooperative Extension are based on the information they receive and what they have experienced with the organization.

The theoretical frame applies to this study because the decisions County Commissioners make are influenced by several factors. Past experiences include how they have been personally involved in Extension programs as well as how effectively staff and citizens communicated about Extension's local impacts. Commissioners can be selective in the information they internalize based on their own criteria for effectiveness and performance. Cooperative Extension can determine these important criteria of effectiveness and the communication methods that are most preferred by this important stakeholder group. Providing the essential information through the preferred methods will positively affect the perceptions of County Commissioners regarding Cooperative Extension.

Conceptual Framework

Qualitative research can include a conceptual context in addition to a theoretical framework. "An umbrella term used for the overall epistemological, theoretical, and methodological approach to a study is called its conceptual framework" (Saldana, 2011, p. 24). The following text and figure incorporate the concepts that have guided this study.

The discussion on perception above – including the input of information and observations, the effects of experience, and interpretation for decisions - may bring to mind the conceptual program planning model outlined by Boone, Safrit, and Jones (2002). In this model the current situation/needs of the learner influences the response of the organization. Educational

inputs lead to outcomes and are interpreted to determine what changes will be made to the program. These concepts put the theory into practice.

Similar to the way perception is affected by the perceiver's situation, County Commissioners will be influenced by their situation when perceiving the performance of Extension. Demographic data for the Commissioner and their county were considered by many related studies. Demographic and related data will seek to measure a set of environmental and situational variables for the respondent and their constituency.

In addition to experience, the evidence a Commissioner receives about Extension programs will affect their perception. This is especially true when this evidence – evaluation criteria – is received through preferred communication methods. Evaluation criteria includes standard measures of educational program effectiveness such as Bennett's evidence of Extension effectiveness (1975) which starts with inputs, activities, participation, and reactions. It then moves on to knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations (often referred to as KASA outcomes), then up the hierarchy to practice change and end results (social/health, economic, and environmental impacts due to the program).

Public Value is another group of performance measurement for Extension programming. Kalambokidis (2004) defined public value as the benefit from Extension programs to those who are not directly served; she urged that sharing the public value of Extension programs is important because "even when policymakers are persuaded of the efficacy of an Extension program, they have questioned whether the program should be supported with scarce public dollars rather than through user charges" (para. 1). Public Value occurs in programs that address one or more criteria for action: imperfect information, distribution of resources, external benefits to production or consumption, public good, and natural monopolies.

These related concepts of educational programming, demographic background, evaluation criteria, and public value weave together with the conceptual framework as follows. A Commissioner's experience with Extension and in local government as well as evidence of Extension efforts delivered through various communication methods are interpreted internally to determine performance perception. Communicating the evidence for Commissioners to receive is a step that cannot be overlooked. Just as psychological perception requires the perceiver to receive the sensory inputs, the County Commissioners must, in some way, receive the information about Cooperative Extension. That is why determining the most effective and preferred methods of communication for this audience is one objective in this study.

A visual representation of the conceptual framework for this study is represented in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Conceptual framework of the study

In other words, Cooperative Extension Performance Perceptions by County Commissioners are based on evidence communicated to them regarding Extension efforts as well as the background of the individual. This study seeks to determine and details of this framework within the scope of the target audience of local elected officials in North Carolina.

Research Related to Elected Official Perceptions of Cooperative Extension

Fifty years after the formation of the Cooperative Extension Service, Blalock conducted a landmark study (1963) on state legislators' perception of the North Carolina Cooperative Agricultural Extension Service (the current title at the time). Blalock interviewed 146 North

Carolina legislators, focusing on how these elected officials perceived the operation of Extension. Blalock determined an “individual’s degree of appraisal of the organization in such areas as: (1) Staff qualification, training, and ability to help the average farmer; (2) Programs and program areas; (3) Size of Extension staff; and (4) Level of salaries paid Extension workers” (p. 126). Level of salaries paid refers to a comparison between Extension workers and School Teachers, School Superintendents or other educators and local leaders. Legislators felt that all the major program areas that Extension focused on at the time were important for their communities.

Interestingly, those elected officials who had a higher appraisal value of Extension indicated higher satisfaction with the organization’s marketing efforts. In terms of marketing efforts and communication methods, Blalock found that the mass mailing of high-quality publications to these officials was ineffective without personal contact with local Extension staff or advocates (Blalock, 1963). Furthermore, Blalock’s study found that of the 146 surveyed, 46 elected officials felt they were not well informed about Extension. This subgroup was split in opinion over how Extension should better inform them; one-third preferred a brief brochure in the mail, a third wanted a visit from an Extension administrator, and the remainder wanted the information “furnished by the local staff rather than an ‘outsider’” (p. 110).

Later in Blalock’s (1963) interview, when asked their perception of the most important source of information about Extension, 101 legislators indicated personal contact and observation of the local staff, while 20 valued comments from farmers and others in the county most highly, with news media as a distant third, and other sources trailing farther behind. These findings may point to the need for a comprehensive marketing plan for Extension rather than

relying on one or two methods of communication with stakeholders and elected officials. In fact, two of Blalock's recommendations involved marketing:

4. It seems important that Extension initiate a positive program for strengthening and improving its image by informing both the legislature and the general public of its efforts and accomplishments. The fact that fewer legislators in the future will have an agricultural association or background is further evidence of this need.

5. More effective ways of communicating with the legislators needs to be developed. The experience with "1.6 in 66" [an agricultural marketing initiative] clearly demonstrates that current methods are not reaching this group. (1963, p. 262)

The 1963 Blalock study also found that nearly two-thirds of the legislators interviewed perceived Extension benefiting all the people in the state, while 35% saw it as an agency designed for the benefit of farmers only. The study also determined perceptions of the most important clientele to target with Extension programs. Legislators felt the average size family farm was most important, followed by small subsistence farmers. The economic impact of agriculture was also investigated; "a majority of legislators possessed a favorable attitude toward agriculture" based on their responses to economic and other indicators (p. 260).

Blalock also worked with a group to produce a journal article (Blalock, Greenwood & Abraham, 1963) based on a series of seminars regarding perceptions of Extension from the public, elected officials, and stakeholders in Arizona, California, Kansas and Montana. Fewer respondents perceived that Cooperative Extension is associated with the County Government than with State or National Departments of Agriculture. The highest number of respondents perceived that Cooperative Extension is associated with the Land Grant Universities. The results

of this study suggest that, at least in the 1960s, the public at large identified Extension as a part of the Universities most, and with county government the least.

The research by Blalock, and also his team of colleagues, set the tone for later research into perceptions of Extension stakeholders and decisionmakers. They studied perceptions, demographics, communication methods, target audiences, pay equity, and much more among state level decision-makers and other key stakeholder groups in North Carolina and across the country. Other researchers conducted studies along these lines in the years to follow.

Chadwick (1966) conducted a descriptive study of Colorado state legislators' evaluation of their state's Extension service. The study sought to identify correlations between knowledge of and involvement in Extension with these decision makers' evaluation of Extension performance. Findings from this study include that greater involvement in Extension led to a better understanding of Extension and higher evaluation of the organization's effectiveness. Chadwick also found that rural legislators tended to be more aware of and involved in Extension than those in urban areas.

Adkins (1980) studied the state Legislators' perception of Maryland Cooperative Extension Service by interviewing a stratified random sample of 92 of the 188 Senators and Delegates. While reviewing relevant literature, Adkins reflected on prior studies, most of which have been mentioned in this section,

...in reviewing the results of these studies [Blalock 1963, Smith 1967, White 1970, McCowan 1969] Smith, White and McCowan all show the Legislator's personal contact with Extension or involvement in Extension programs exerts the greatest influence on his perception of Extension. Blalock supports this by noting that seven out of ten legislators identified their contact with and observation of local Extension staff as the one most

important source of information and influence in helping to shape their perception of the Extension Service (p. 14).

Adkins (1980) reported in his research that “legislators who know Extension most intimately commented that Extension must raise its profile, get into the limelight and broaden its image” (p. 153). Other comments from his study showed that “in addition to a summary and description of programs, legislators were also interested in results. There is a need for some type of Annual Report giving major accomplishments as a state and county report” (p. 154).

According to the research Adkins (1980) conducted with the Maryland Legislators, “the factors most frequently correlated with the respondents’ perception of Maryland Extension were: (1) geographic region represented, (2) legislator’s place of residence, (3) constituents represented, (4) age of legislator, (5) race of legislator” (p. 132). These factors were common in the analyses of several perceptions about Maryland Extension that Adkins combined into an overall perception; combined perceptions included Extension programs, purpose, faculty, organization, finance, and clientele. Adkins also found that, “little or no significant relationship was observed from interaction involving role in legislature, political party, education level, service on county [commission] council and committee leadership” (1980, p. 132). The findings indicate that older, rural, white legislators tended to have more positive perceptions of Extension than younger, urban, black legislators. As for the racial difference, black legislators at the time of the study represented urban areas of the state. This study by Adkins is one of the few to find statistical significance or correlations with any demographic variable, especially race and age. Although it wasn’t statistically correlated, one demographic variable surfaced when considering the client groups aided by Extension. “The female legislators viewed Extension as benefiting more than just agriculture. They also appeared to be better informed about Extension than did the

male legislators” (p. 135). Adkins (1980) also asked interview questions regarding how Legislators preferred to receive information about Extension and found they need program descriptions and resource lists via newsletter and prefer personal contact from Extension staff to make better-informed decisions about funding.

Lobbying strategies were investigated by Mullen in 1980 when comparing techniques used and preferred by state Extension Administrators, Lobbyists, and Legislators of the State of Ohio when affecting decisions on budget and finance. Mullen (1980) found that legislators on the finance committee relied the most on personal accounts directly from administrators of an agency requesting funds, whereas none of the Extension administrators interviewed saw their role as having anything to do with communicating individually with the legislators.

Demographically, the years of service and years in one’s current role didn’t affect the Legislators’ perceptions of the effectiveness of different means of communication from Extension. The need for consistency throughout the organization was repeated through the study when positive perceptions were shared regarding the director, but varying degrees of effectiveness were assigned to local lay leaders sharing Extension needs and impacts by the respondents. Consistently using effective communication strategies is important to convey needs and situations to busy state elected officials.

Lindquist (1987) conducted a telephone survey with a randomly selected 401 individuals in Kansas and found that users of Extension services were more likely to be highly satisfied with Extension programs. Another finding was that respondents who were very satisfied with Extension were more likely to support greatly increasing funding for the organization. This study helps to make the connection between program utilization, satisfaction and funding among the public.

Based on structured interviews with 60 legislators in Michigan, Wahl (1989) discovered that non-personal communication (newsletters, mailings, television announcements) from Extension staff was most influential toward the legislators' perception of the importance of Cooperative Extension. Wahl (1989) also found that these non-personal contacts along with personal interactions were necessary to help them develop an adequate understanding of the Extension organization. Of all the methods mentioned by these officials, one-on-one contacts with Extension staff and clients were the preferred communication method between Extension and the legislators (Wahl, 1989). Personal contact is important for Extension with a balance of other methods to positively influence the perception of elected officials with information about programs, benefits, and impacts to the community.

Key legislators in Minnesota were surveyed to determine what factors and criteria they use when voting on Extension funding requests in that state. Kabes (1991) provided 52 points to select on a survey to the 20 voting members of the state's funding committee, and the "findings show that legislators were influenced by their perceptions of Extension's results and impacts" (p. 1). Specifically, three of the top five criteria chosen by respondents pertinent to this study are: 1.) Perception of Extension Effectiveness, 2.) Quality of Extension Work in Your District or in the State, and 5.) Information Provided to You by Extension Agents in Your District About Extension's Accomplishments. (Kabes, 1991). This study suggests that criteria used to evaluate Extension includes overall effectiveness as well as impacts generated by the organization, and communication with the stakeholder makes a difference as is discussed in the following section.

At the state level of Cooperative Extension, University administrators manage the personnel, programs, and funding for the organization. Comer (2002) conducted a Delphi study to determine attitudes and perceptions of North Carolina statewide administrators regarding the

role of Cooperative Extension. Survey results from 11 of the 23 administrators “found that administrators in North Carolina believe that Extension will face funding issues in the future due to poor political support, competition from the private sector, and increased inferences on program relevance” (p. 69). Comer found that NC Extension administrators “believed that the lack of political support will have an adverse affect [sic] on funding” (2002, p. 73). This perspective from Extension organizational leaders paints the picture of great need to communicate with local decision-makers about the impacts and relevancy of Extension in ways that align with local needs and goals.

According to a study conducted with County Extension Directors in North Carolina, navigating the local political landscape and budget issues is critical throughout a County Extension Director’s career, especially at his or her early career (Owen, 2004). When ranking the importance of 39 sub-competencies for local Extension administration, Owen’s study identified understanding the NCCE and County Government Partnership as the most critical for achieving success in their role (2004). This finding highlights the need for Extension local administrators to communicate and work well with local government officials to be successful in Extension programming.

To determine indicators of the quality of a Total County Program (combination of all subject matter programs at a local Extension office), Shaw (2005) surveyed 259 decision makers, stakeholders and administrators of Extension in North Carolina. Shaw also convened County partners, state level Extension Administration, Advisory Council members and Extension personnel in focus groups to confirm the survey data and determine appropriate quality indicators for Extension programming. Shaw found that the “decision makers’ level of interaction was the single most influential factor overall quality indicators of the Total County

Extension Program” (2005, p. 189). Meaning, the more that a client or county partner is involved with Extension, the higher perception of quality they have of the Total County Program. The County partners surveyed tended to perceive higher quality in programs that were locally focused, collaborative, based on individual needs, and future oriented (Shaw, 2005). These factors and others in the study should be considered when constructing communication strategies with these different groups of decision makers.

Surls (2008) studied the county piece of the Cooperative Extension system nationwide and made several findings. Of the 370 County Extension Directors responding from across the country, 97% receive funding from county budgets and are highly likely to have a Memorandum of Understanding which has been revisited with the local government entity in the last five years. Also, a correlation was found between Extension offices facing budget cuts and those County Extension Directors who had less access to county officials and who lacked an advisory council; increasing budgets were correlated to Directors with better access to elected officials, an advisory board, and a longer tenure in their administrative role. Relationships with local government are obviously important and impactful since respondents who believed they have a strong partnership with local government are more likely to have a relationship or at least access to local elected officials, and strong financial and other support from their county (Surls, 2008).

Research Related to County Commissioner Perceptions of Cooperative Extension

White (1965) conducted a study with 85 County Commissioners in Northeastern part of North Carolina and found that County Commissioners perceived agricultural policy, natural resources management, and farm family economics as primary functions of Extension. County commissioners also identified farmers and farm families as the most important clientele of Extension.

Campbell (1968) investigated the attitudes of Oklahoma County Commissioners regarding area specialized agents. This was not a new idea at the time but was recently implemented in that state. Of the 178 Commissioners in that state, 143 (80%) responded to Campbell's survey from counties with and without area agents. The majority (85%) of Commissioners agreed that even if all agents had area responsibilities, an office should remain established in each county. Nearly one-fifth indicated that Extension can be effective if every area agent was responsible for a 6-8 county area. However, "less than one-third of the commissioners indicated they would be willing to allocate county funds to secure the services of a specialized agricultural agent to work in their county," while "a majority of the commissioners believe that farmers and others who receive help should pay fees" (Campbell, 1968, p. 64) to offset the cost of services. It seems as if the commissioners surveyed want all the benefits of Extension without all the costs to their budget.

Kelly (1973) conducted a survey research with the county commissioners in fifteen of the most urban and fifteen of the most rural counties in Florida. Kelly (1973) found that rural commissioners were more familiar with Extension programs while urban commissioners were often found to have participated in some Extension activities. Urban commissioners were more likely to be younger and less experienced in their elected role. At that point in Florida, rural commissioners were likely farmers or agricultural business professionals (61%) whereas fewer than one in seven of their urban counterparts were engaged in occupations relating to agriculture. Urban commissioners felt that agriculture was important to the local economy, but not as much so as rural commissioners (Kelly, 1973).

A study conducted with County Commissioners and Extension staff in Idaho also revealed a desire for information from a trusted and close by source. Shane (1981) mailed

surveys to the 42 counties with Extension offices and 85% of the 57 commissioners who responded based their assessment of Cooperative Extension on their own observations and their local agricultural agent. Shane's 1981 study also found that 95% of the commissioners were satisfied with their relationship with the local agent, whereas only half of the agents felt this way. This link between local Extension staff and Local Elected Officials is a critically important one.

Shane (1981) found that most commissioners in Idaho saw the role of Extension to be helping people solve problems and provide information. They tended to value participation in community affairs and advising farm groups as the greatest benefit to their constituency. Interestingly, Shane (1981) found a significant disconnect between what elected officials valued in Extension and what Agriculture Agents prioritize in their programming because agents felt their most important activity was to provide information to the farmer. These activities are somewhat related, but the decision-makers valued more broad-reaching activities while the agents felt greater importance with individual assistance. Aligning staff activities with stakeholder values is an important reason to study the values of elected officials and adjust plans of work and objectives accordingly.

Additionally, Commissioners in the Shane study perceived that little time should be spent with commercial farmers or those who spent more than 50% of their time off-farm (1981). Rather, programming priorities should be devoted to community affairs and advising farm groups, according to the respondents. Agents, on the other hand, placed direct advising as their first priority with community affairs and advising farm groups (top commissioner priorities) farther down in their top ten list of important activities (Shane, 1981). This study highlights the importance of a local link to elected officials from Extension and the disconnect that may be present between perceptions of elected officials and Extension staff.

In open-ended interviews with County Commissioners in six western Washington Counties and their County Extension Directors in 2005, Steinbarger found that Commissioners didn't always associate Extension programs with critical local issues. Most of the respondents valued the return on investment from Extension and identified major programming focus areas such as 4-H youth development and Agriculture. Although the Commissioners seemed to value what Cooperative Extension does, they did not always associate that value with the organization or the University (Steinbarger, 2005).

The 2005 Shaw study listed above also included a component of County Commissioners. According to Shaw, demographics of the elected officials had varying effects on perceptions of quality for the Total County Program. Commissioners with "a graduate degree placed a higher value on programs that accessed targeted populations," (p. 194) and valued Extension programs that were an integral part of county government, as well as those that were delivered collaboratively. Race (dichotomized as white or nonwhite) influenced perceptions of value respondents placed on some factors researched. Programs focused on personal relationships and accountable to state and federal levels were preferred by white Commissioners; non-white Commissioners more strongly preferred diverse audiences and programs that "make a unique contribution and programs with significant societal impact" (p. 194). Age and gender were found to have no significant influence on total quality perception, though preference for certain factors differ slightly between the genders; technical competence and local accountability are preferred by males (Shaw 2005).

Cannizzaro (2007) surveyed 105 of the 582 members of local governing bodies (called Police Juries or Parrish Councils) in Louisiana for determining their perceptions about the importance of Extension. Program awareness data and perceptions of importance indicated that

local officials held 4-H youth programs in higher regard than Extension, the LSU Ag Center, or agriculture programs offered by Extension. As Cannizzaro's (2007) study makes clear, marketing is a widespread issue for Extension, and there is a need to tighten the public connection between individual programs like 4-H or volunteer groups with the greater Extension organization.

Cannizzaro (2007) also studied the utilization of program events and communications from Extension with these local elected officials in Louisiana. Four of the information sources investigated were ranked as moderately utilized (newspaper articles, Extension newsletters, personal contacts from agents, and printed material from agents), with seven ranked as occasionally utilized (family members and friends talking about Extension, officials attending programs, phone calls with agents, contacts from constituents, visits to Extension offices, radio, and TV). Only one item was utilized rarely (LSU Ag Center website), but no items were ranked frequently (Cannizzaro 2007). This data may provide a baseline for further study into communication strategies with decision-makers.

In that study Cannizzaro (2007) found that Local Governing Body members' perceptions of the importance of Extension programs were correlated to four items surveyed. The top of the list was their perception of the Extension program's effectiveness, next was the extent of utilization (how these officials engaged with information about Extension), awareness of Extension programs across their state, and attendance at Extension events was fourth, but still a positive correlation. Cannizzaro (2007) also found that officials' age, gender, political experience, occupation, and education did not correlate with their perceptions of Extension performance.

Cannizzaro (2007) did propose a model for program perception. This Louisiana study indicated that the general perception of members of Local Governing Bodies toward the

importance of Extension programs was due to their perception of programs meeting community needs, to what extent officials utilized Extension information, their attendance of Extension events, and the population density of their parish. As a result, the more effectively Extension informs officials about and attracts those officials to its programs, the more positive perceptions will be formed, especially in rural areas (Cannizaro, 2007). This study reflects the multitude of factors associated with perceptions of program performance by elected officials.

Others have studied what Commissioners value and perceive in the roles that Extension plays in their community. For example, Lindstrom (2007) investigated County Commissioners' level of knowledge in the state of Washington regarding Extension and how willing they were to fund the organization. The County Commissioners responded to Lindstrom's study tended to value the overall programs of Extension and considered Extension to be a good value for the local investment. According to this study, 84% of respondents perceived Extension as important for their constituents; 67% perceived that the organization is effective in their communities. Lindstrom assumed that adequate knowledge and positive perceptions on the part of commissioners in the study related to levels of their willingness to fund the organization. To this point, the study found that 65% of respondents indicated a willingness to fund Extension at present levels; and 33% were willing to fund the organization at a higher level. Lindstrom also uncovered some challenges for future funding: local budget constraints, and changing local priorities for funds and personnel, and core county responsibilities. Despite these obstacles, Lindstrom's 2007 study yields the conclusion that "there appears to be a trend between the Washington State county commissioners' perception of WSU, knowledge thereof and the willingness to fund Extension" (p. 111).

County Extension Directors in Counties with higher populations tend to have a weaker relationship with their Commissioners even though urban counties tend to financially invest more in Extension programs (Surls, 2008). Interestingly, farm-dependent Counties were more likely to have a declining budget for Extension (p. 168), presumably due to a limited tax base not program performance. “However, relationship building, networking, and coalition building are important to all Cooperative Extension offices, regardless of where they fall on the rural/urban extension continuum” (Surls, 2008, p. 168). It is important to understand the local situation and how demographic and other factors contribute to the success or at least the perception of Extension performance.

Summary

In order to enhance and strengthen the partnership between County Extension Centers and the County surrounding and supporting them, this study will build on the body of research discussed above regarding perception and communication strategies with elected officials. A theoretical framework was presented with relevant research regarding perceptions of Extension program performance. State Legislator and stakeholder studies were reviewed with respect to their relationship with and perceptions of Cooperative Extension. Research specific to County Commissioners and Extension was highlighted for contributions in performance perception, evaluation criteria, communication methods, and demographics.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This section describes the population, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis of this study. Information is also included regarding research design, validity and reliability of the instrument, as well as addressing nonresponse error.

Purpose and Objectives of the Research

The purpose of this study is to determine County Commissioner perceptions of Extension performance, their preferred communication methods, and evaluation criteria for determining the effectiveness of Cooperative Extension. More specifically this study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. Determine the demographic characteristics of County Commissioners and their Counties.
2. Determine County Commissioners' perceptions about the performance of Cooperative Extension.
3. Determine County Commissioners' communication preferences in receiving information about Extension's impacts and efforts
4. Identify the evaluation criteria used by County Commissioners to determine the effectiveness of Extension.
5. Determine whether there is any correlation between County Commissioners' perceptions about the performance of Cooperative Extension and their demographic variables.
6. Determine suggestions made by County Commissioners to build a stronger working relationship between Cooperative Extension and County Government.

Research Design

This was a descriptive correlational survey research study. Demographic statistics and evaluations of perceptions are descriptive in nature (Gravetter & Forzano, 2015). Descriptions of the individuals, their communities, the feelings they had about the communication methods, evaluation criteria, and performance characteristics were investigated in this study. Correlational aspects to this study compare demographic data to find relationships between these variables, as well as the direction and magnitude of relationships that are discovered without controlling for, or experimenting with, any of the known variables as described by Price, Jhangiani, and Chiang (2015).

A survey is a method of data collection using questionnaires or interviews to generalize findings to a population (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Randomized samples of a population are often utilized for research studies in which a census of the entire population is not practical, effective, or cost efficient (Israel, 2003). The population of County Commissioners in North Carolina in 2018 was 583 individuals. An appropriate randomized sample of this population would require at least 150 responses for a +/-7% confidence interval (Israel, 2003). In this case, access to electronic and telephone contact with the entire population was practical and obtainable through public record and public officials. Because of these considerations (Israel, 2018), a census study was conducted.

Population and Sample

There are 583 County Commissioners in the state as of the 2016 election with one replacement due to death. Of the 100 Counties, 58 have five commissioners, two have six commissioners, 31 have seven commissioners, one has eight commissioners, and the remaining eight boards have nine members (Worsham, 2016).

A directory of all County Commissioner names in North Carolina was obtained through the NC Association of County Commissioners. Contact information for the individual Commissioners was obtained through web searches and requests through Clerks to the Boards of Commissioners in Counties where websites did not provide email addresses for these elected officials. Only one individual had no access to email, so a telephone-based survey was offered to that Commissioner.

Instrumentation

The survey instrument was developed to collect necessary data for achieving specified research objectives. The questionnaire consisted of four sections to determine: 1) demographic characteristics of Commissioners and their representing Counties; 2) County Commissioners' perceptions about the performance of Cooperative Extension; 3) their preferred method of communication in receiving information about Extension programming, results, and resources; and 4) evaluation criteria used by County Commissioners.

Related studies investigated the descriptions of the elected officials they surveyed and the demographics of their constituencies. The following demographic variables appeared consistently in nine related studies of elected officials and their perceptions of Cooperative Extension by Campbell (1968), Cannizaro (2007), Cox (1972), Dowell (1969), Kelly (1973), Lindstrom (2007), Nolan (2008), Shane (1981), and Wahl (1989): years served, age, highest level of education, occupation, participation in Extension, race, and gender. In most of these instances, race and gender were weakly associated, if at all, with the Extension variables studied, and mostly coincided with other factors. For example, African American males in one study presented similar preferences; "this may have been influenced, however, by the fact with only one exception all the black legislators were from urban Baltimore City legislative districts"

(Adkins 1980, p. 31). Because of consistently weak associations, the variables of race and gender were omitted from this study.

County demographics were investigated in many studies. The frequency of the following factors in other literature and how they relate to the research objectives in this study warranted their potential inclusion: rural/suburban/urban nature of the county, population, growth rate, and agriculture's importance in the economy. These variables appeared consistently in five related studies (Campbell, 1968; Cannizaro, 2007; Kelly, 1973; Nolan, 2008; Wahl, 1989). Two of these variables were included in the survey instrument: rural/suburban/urban characteristics, and agriculture's local economic importance. Although this information pertains to the first objective in this study, the questions were placed at the end of the survey instrument since they were simple responses. Other items were more complicated and were placed earlier in the questionnaire as suggested by Dillman (2007). No questions on the survey instrument were required to be answered.

A 10-item instrument with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=somewhat agree, 5=strongly agree) was developed to record County Commissioners' perceptions toward NCCE. The 10 items in the instrument were selected based on the related literature. These 10 items regarding performance perception were aggregated to get County Commissioners' overall perception toward NCCE. The overall perception on this instrument can range from 10 being very negative perception to 50 being very positive perception toward Extension; the Appendix contains the survey instrument for greater detail.

The instrument for recording County Commissioners' preferred method of receiving information about Extension programming, results, and resources was developed based on NC

Cooperative Extension reporting categories and annual Plans of Action templates.

Communication methods include newsletters, annual reports, news media, social media, and direct contact with staff. Other items were inferred from the reports and advisory council activities such as event information, website content, and citizen input. County Commissioners' communication method preferences were recorded using an instrument with eight items and a five-point Likert scale (1=do not prefer, 2=slightly prefer, 3=moderately prefer, 4=strongly prefer, 5=very strongly prefer). Additionally, respondents were asked to specify if there is any other item they prefer to receive information from NCCE and rate it on the 5-point Likert-type scale.

An instrument was developed to determine the evaluation criteria used by County Commissioners for determining the effectiveness of Cooperative Extension. This item includes evaluation metrics that are commonly used in Extension such as program outcomes (numbers of events and attendees), impacts (jobs created, money saved, knowledge gained, skills learned), and return on investment. The instrument included commonly used 11 evaluation items with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=not at all important, 2=slightly important, 3=moderately important, 4=very important, 5=extremely important). Additionally, respondents were asked to specify if there is any other item they use to evaluate the work of NCCE and rate it on the 5-point Likert-type scale.

An open-ended question was included at the end of the survey instrument to determine County Commissioners' suggestions for strengthening the relationship between Cooperative Extension and County Governments. Typed responses to this question were expected to provide information that could be categorized and applied broadly. Any comments that indicated an individual County or person were redacted for anonymity.

Validity and Reliability

The content validity of the instrument was established by receiving the comments and suggestions made by a panel of seven experts in extension education. Professors and Extension professionals provided feedback that streamlined the survey instrument, clarified some of the questions, and simplified data collection.

The face validity of the instrument was established by soliciting input from a panel of retired County Commissioners and County Managers for the instrument. Although this panel was primarily from the Southeastern portion of North Carolina, these individuals had been quite active in the NC Association of County Commissioners and were well aware of issues facing the entire state. Their input adjusted some of the formatting, semantics, and flow of the survey instrument.

The instrument was pilot tested for reliability with a sample of 26 retired County Commissioners (since current Commissioners were in the study population), County Managers, and County Extension Directors (with at least 5 years of experience to establish a relationship with local County Commissioners). Cronbach's Alpha was calculated for the different scales used in the survey instrument for testing the reliability. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient describes the reliability of questionnaires or scales; a score of 0.7 is acceptable, though the higher the score the more reliable the scale in an instrument (Santos, 1999). According to pilot test data, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated for each of the following sections: performance perceptions (0.95), communication preferences (0.75), and evaluation criteria (0.73). All sections demonstrate acceptable reliability with the performance perceptions section scoring the highest reliability.

Data Collection Procedures

Many factors were considered when developing a strategy to increase response rate primarily based on research by Dillman (2007) who suggested a Tailored Design Method with five different contacts for the study sample. These contacts included a prenotice letter, questionnaire mailout, postcard thank you/reminder, replacement questionnaire, and a final mailing/call. A later version of the book with additional authors also encourages multiple contacts in different media (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014).

Both Dillman volumes (2007 & 2014) emphasize a social exchange concept in survey design where a researcher must establish trust (express appreciation and validity), reduce social costs (make it easy and simple), and increase benefits (show saliency and importance) during the survey experience. This contrasts with an economic exchange characterized by giving tokens of appreciation *after* responding, requiring a response, and designing a survey based on the researcher's needs rather than the respondent's situation.

This study utilized multiple media types and principles of quality survey development to further engage respondents. A postcard invitation to the research, including a link to the online survey, was sent on March 1st. Three days later, an email was sent to participants; the message included verification from a leader in the state association of County Commissioners to help establish trust. The following week, a follow-up email was sent with further information about the importance of each person's response and additional support from leaders in the statewide County Commissioners association. For a fourth contact, selected commissioners from counties that have no respondents were called to encourage survey participation online or to respond by phone. Finally, a follow-up email was sent on the third week following the initial mailing.

The survey was conducted online using Qualtrics. This software provides response tracking capabilities to resend the instrument only to non-respondents while keeping all responses confidential and isolated from a respondent's identity. For goodwill and in an effort to increase the feeling of saliency of the study, respondents are given the opportunity to share their email address in order to receive a copy of the results of the study. These email addresses could be individual identifiers and were separately collected from the survey data to prevent a loss of confidentiality and were clearly noted as not required to be submitted, which was a point of importance with the NC State University Internal Review Board. Data were analyzed collectively to further avoid revealing responses that could be assigned to an individual commissioner.

Response to Survey and Addressing Nonresponse Error

A total of 163 responses were collected over eight weeks. A final attempt was made to gain respondents in which Extension Directors were contacted in the Counties that had not yet produced a respondent. CEDs provided direct contact information for at least one Commissioner who was then called to conduct the same survey via telephone. A total of 22 responses were obtained through the final attempt (21 by phone, 1 online survey response), bringing the total number of respondents to 185 from the total population of 583.

Low response rates are common among elected officials when conducting survey research. For example, Shaw (2005) completed a research study on County Extension funding and program partners in North Carolina with a County Commissioner response rate of only 33%; this rate was gained by utilizing Shaw's personal contact in each of the 14 County study locations. The response rate of 32% in this study is comparable with that of Shaw's 2005 study, without an extensive network of personal contacts in each of the state's 100 Counties.

Research by Lindner, Murphy and Briers (2001) suggests addressing nonresponse error by comparing early and late respondents (those collected in the final wave of data collection). The 21 late respondents surveyed by telephone were used to compare to the respondents from the initial waves of requests for nonresponse error. In order to analyze any differences between these two respondent groups, independent t-tests were conducted based on the Commissioner demographic characteristics of age, highest level of education, and years of service. Table 1 compiles this information.

The mean age of early respondents was 63.1 years (respondents were asked their year of birth and age was calculated from this information), and the later respondents had an average age of 60.1 years. Analysis yielded a t-value of 1.2 and a 2-tailed p-level of 0.24. This means there is no significant difference between the two respondent groups and nonresponse error is not a factor based on age.

The highest level of education attained was averaged over the seven options provided on the survey instrument from less than High School Degree (value of 1) to Professional Degree (value of 7). The average of these values for early respondents was 4.6 and for late respondents was 4.9 with a t-value of 0.7 at a p-level of 0.45 (2-tailed). This analysis indicates no significant difference of the two respondent groups and allows for the groups to be treated similarly based on level of education.

The mean of years served for early respondents was 7.7 and the late respondent group showed a mean of 7.1 with a t-value of 0.4 at a P-level of 0.66. Years of service shows no significant difference between the early and late respondent groups, so nonresponse error is not considered a threat in this case.

Based on the three demographic variables of the respondents, none of them showed significant differences between early and late respondent groups. As a result, the respondent sample of County Commissioners is considered representative of the population based on reasonings from Lindner, Murphy, & Briers (2001). See Table 1 for this comparison.

Table 1

Comparison of Demographic Variables of Early and Late Respondents

Demographic Variable	Early Respondents	Late Respondents	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> (2-tailed)
	Mean	Mean		
Age	63.1	60.1	1.2	0.24
Highest level of education*	4.6	4.9	0.7	0.45
Years served on County Commission	7.7	7.1	0.4	0.66

Note. *Scale: 1=Less than high school degree, 2=High school graduate, 3=Some college but no degree, 4=Associate degree, 5=Bachelor’s degree, 6=Master’s degree, 7=Professional degree (Ph.D., JD, MD, etc.) **Significant at $p \leq 0.05$.

Analyses of Data

Data were analyzed using the IBM-SPSS version 24 for achieving research objectives. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze data for achieving the first four objectives. Correlation analysis was conducted to achieve the fifth objective.

Summary

The survey instrument was developed by selecting from related studies appropriate questions which align with the research objectives of this study and conducted as a census survey among the 583 County Commissioners in North Carolina. The questionnaire includes four sections: county and commissioner characteristics, performance perception, communication strategies, and evaluation metrics. The instrument was determined to have acceptable validity and reliability through panel review and pilot testing. Nonresponse error was addressed such that the 185 responses to this study can be applied to the study population of NC County Commissioners.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter describes and relates the analyzed data collected from the survey instrument of this study to the research objectives. The purpose of this study was to determine County Commissioner perceptions of Extension performance, their preferred communication methods, and evaluation criteria for determining the effectiveness of Cooperative Extension. The reported results within this chapter are organized around the six research objectives of this study.

Findings Related to Objective 1

This section describes the characteristics of the population and the respondents of this study based on the objective, “determine the demographic characteristics of County Commissioners and their Counties.” The state of North Carolina is divided into 100 Counties each with its own governing body of County Commissioners. Each Board of County Commissioners consists of five to nine members who were all invited to participate in this study.

First, consider the spread of respondents across the state. The North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service is divided into five administrative regions. The distribution of respondents from the different Extension districts across the state is represented in Table 2. The range of respondent distribution was 23 in the Southeast and West Districts to 31 from the Northeast District. Fifty-five respondents did not indicate the County they served. As a result, the percentage of the total sample and percent of known locations exhibit an inequality as presented in Table 2. This table demonstrates widespread participation of County Commissioners representing the Extension districts in this study.

Table 2

Distribution of Respondents by NC Cooperative Extension Districts

Extension District	Number of Respondents	Percent of Total Respondents	Percent of Respondents Indicating a Location (N=130)
North Central	27	14.3	20.8
Northeast	31	16.5	23.8
South Central	26	13.6	20.0
Southeast	23	12.0	17.7
West	23	12.0	17.7
Subtotal	130	70.3	100.0
Location Unspecified	55	29.7	
Total	185	100.0	

County characteristics were also investigated. Commissioners were asked to describe their constituents as either urban, rural, or a mixture of the two. Only three percent classified their district residents as urban; more than a third of the respondents considered their electorate a mix of urban and rural, while greater than half serve primarily rural populations, as shown in Table 3. Statewide, 80 counties (80%) are considered rural and six are urban (6%), and the remaining 14 (14%) are suburban or contain regional cities according to the NC Rural Center (2015). Commissioners indicated much higher suburban characteristics of their constituents than is reflective of the state. Nearly half as many indicated urban as would have been expected, and rural indications were also reduced.

Table 3

Distribution of County Commissioners Based on Their Indication of Urban, Suburban, or Rural Nature of Their Constituents (N=179)

Category of Constituents	Frequency	Percent
Urban	6	3.4
Suburban or Mixture of Urban/Rural	68	38.0
Rural	105	58.6

Another demographic question on the survey instrument investigated how Commissioners felt about the importance of agriculture to their local economy. This question

was asked to determine the relative importance of agriculture in the local economy. Agricultural statistics are available for every county from the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (2019). The survey question, however, revealed Commissioner perceptions of agricultural importance rather than their statistical recall. Two-thirds felt that Agriculture is extremely important to their county’s local economy, and over one-fourth of the Commissioners considered it to be very important as seen in Table 4. Nine respondents (five percent) classified Agriculture as moderately or slightly important, and only one Commissioner out of the 176 weighing in on this topic felt that it was not at all important.

Table 4

How Important is Agriculture to Your Local Economy? (N=176)

Importance of Agriculture	Frequency	Percentage
Extremely important	118	67.0%
Very important	48	27.3%
Moderately important	5	2.8%
Slightly important	4	2.3%
Not at all important	1	0.6%
Total	176	100.0

Data for years of service in the elected County position were collected for the respondents. The range was one year to 29 years with a mean of 7.65 and a median value of 6, with a standard deviation of 6.085 for the 174 responses to this particular question. A histogram in Figure 3 reveals additional information. A heavily weighted rookie end shows a high population of commissioners with only a few years of service in the group of respondents. A long tail of higher years shows that an experienced few hold office for longer than the second small histogram peak of 16 years.

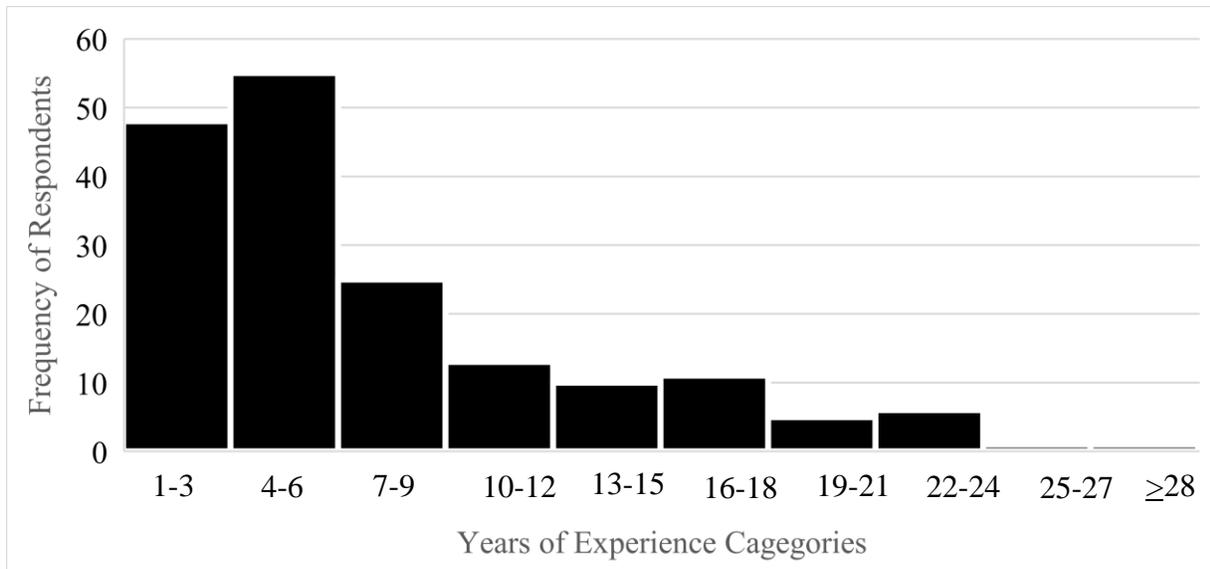


Figure 3. Distribution of respondents by years of experience in County Commissioner position (N=174)

Respondent ages ranged from 30 to 85 years with a mean of 62.75 years and a median age of 64. Separating the ages by decade provides additional depth to the age data. A bell curve can be observed in this data set regarding the age of Commissioners with ages tailing off quickly outside the 50-80-year old range. This observation aligns with the data in Figure 4 regarding a mean of nearly 63 years and a standard deviation of just more than a decade.

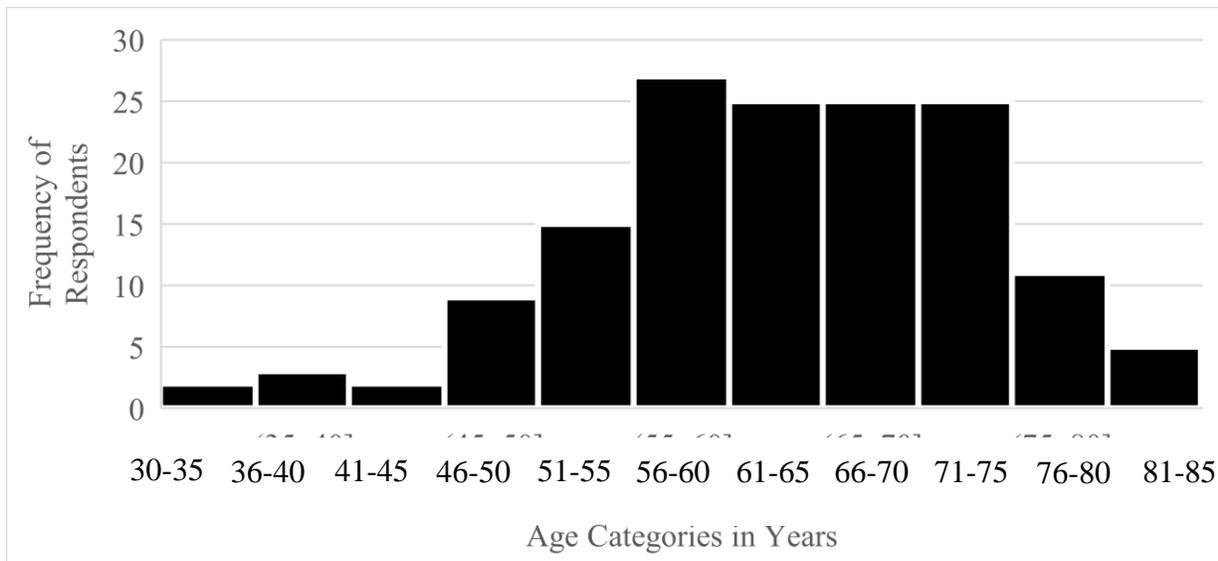


Figure 4. Distribution of respondents by age (N=149)

To determine possible effects of personal exposure to Extension programming on other variables, the respondents were asked about their involvement in Extension other than as a Commissioner. The survey instrument was designed so that multiple categories of involvement could be selected, and text could be entered if “other” was chosen. Most of the respondents (117 respondents, 63.2%) had attended events or classes in the past and nearly a fourth (45 respondents, 24.3%) volunteered in some capacity at events or classes. One-fifth of the participants (38 respondents, 20.5%) have a child who is or was a 4-H member, 29 respondents (15.7%) indicated they have been a member of a local or state advisory council, and 26 respondents (14.1%) chose none of these options for involvement in Extension. The most common write-in responses for “other” described their own experience as a 4-H member as a child (six responses) and utilization of Extension services (five responses). This information regarding Commissioners’ involvement in Extension is found in Table 5.

Table 5

Respondents' Involvement in Extension (N=185)

Type of Engagement	Frequency	Percent
Attended events/classes	117	63.2
Volunteered at events/programs	45	24.3
Have a child who was/is a 4-H member	38	20.5
Member of local or state advisory council	29	15.7
None	26	14.1
Other	32	17.3

In order to utilize this information about Extension involvement in further analysis, responses were aggregated to create a separate variable with the total number of different types of interactions. The response categories on this aggregated scale ranged from “not involved at all” in Extension to “involved in all of five” activities listed in Table 6. The great majority (86%) of respondents have engaged in at least one or more events or activities.

Table 6

Distribution of County Commissioners Based on Their Involvement in Extension (N=178)

Level of Involvement	n	Percent
Not involved at all	25	14.0
Involved in one of five listed below	80	44.9
Involved in two of five listed below	43	24.2
Involved in three of five listed below	26	14.6
Involved in four of five listed below	4	2.2
Involved in all of five listed below	0	0

Note. 1. Attended event/classes, 2. Volunteered at events/programs, 3. Member of local or state advisory council, 4. Have a child who was/is a 4-H member, 5. Other

Data regarding the Commissioner's highest level of education were also requested from the respondents. One-third (55 respondents, 34.2%) completed a Bachelor's degree and one-fourth (39 respondents, 24.2%) had some college but no degree. Another fourth of the respondents were split nearly in half with Associate (21 respondents, 13%) and Master's (22 respondents, 13.7%) degrees. Nearly one in nine earned a professional degree (14 respondents,

8.7%) and 10 respondents (6.2%) were high school graduates. These education demographics are represented in Table 7.

Table 7

Distribution of County Commissioners by their Highest Level of Education (N=161)

Level of Education	<i>n</i>	Percent
Less than high school degree	0	0
High school graduate (or equivalent including GED)	10	6.2
Some college but no degree	39	24.2
Associate degree in college (2-year)	21	13.0
Bachelor's degree in college (4-year)	55	34.2
Master's degree	22	13.7
Professional degree (Ph.D, JD, MD, Ed.D)	14	8.7

Demographic information for County Commissioners and their Counties were displayed and discussed to provide background and understanding of the population. Overall, participants represent all parts of the state, a wide range of ages and years of service, as well as various other characteristics investigated in this study.

Findings Related to Objective 2

The second objective of this study was to determine County Commissioners’ perceptions about the performance of Cooperative Extension. A 10-item instrument with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=somewhat agree, 5=strongly agree) recorded County Commissioners’ perceptions toward NCCE. As Table 8 indicates, the four items most respondents strongly agreed were: Extension adds value to our community (73%), makes positive impacts (65.2%), is an effective organization (64.7%), and aligns with my County goals/vision (62.9%). The two items least percentage of respondents agreed were Extension shares the amount of information I need to make decisions about their programs (45.8%) and shares the type of information I need to make decisions about their programs (42.5%). Four items were in the middle of this ranking with

percentages of strongly agree in the 50's; these items were: reaches the people who need the services Extension provides (50.3%), is cost effective (50.6%), shares important information with people who might not access it otherwise (52.0%), is an efficient organization (52.6%).

Table 8

County Commissioners' Perceptions about the Performance of Cooperative Extension

Performance Item	n	Percent of the Respondents Indicated				
		Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Adds value to our community	174	0.6	1.7	1.7	23.0	73.0
Makes positive impacts	178	0.6	1.1	1.1	32.0	65.2
Is an effective organization	173	0.6	2.3	2.3	30.1	64.7
Aligns with my County goals/vision	178	0.6	0.6	7.3	28.7	62.9
Is an efficient organization	156	1.3	2.6	7.7	35.9	52.6
Shares important information with people who might not access it otherwise	173	2.3	1.7	8.7	35.3	52.0
Is cost effective	174	1.1	2.9	12.1	33.3	50.6
Reaches the people who need services Extension provides	177	1.1	3.4	6.2	39.0	50.3
Shares the amount of information I need to make decisions about programs	155	1.9	3.9	12.3	36.1	45.8
Shares the type of information I need to make decisions about programs	174	2.3	4.6	10.9	39.7	42.5

Findings Related to Objective 3

The third research objective of this study is to determine County Commissioners' communication preferences in receiving information about Extension's impacts and efforts. These findings are helpful when considering how best to share information about Extension programming with local decision makers. This was recorded using a 10-item question with a five-point Likert scale of preference options: do not prefer, slightly prefer, moderately prefer,

strongly prefer, and very strongly prefer. Responses to this question are summarized in Table 9 in descending order of the percentage indicated for very strongly prefer.

Table 9

County Commissioners' Communication Preferences in Receiving Information about Extension Impacts and Efforts.

Method of Communication	N	Percentage of Respondents Indicated				
		Do not prefer	Slightly prefer	Moderately prefer	Strongly Prefer	Very Strongly Prefer
Personal contact with Extension staff	177	0.6	4.0	18.6	42.9	33.9
Feedback directly from citizens	177	1.7	4.5	16.9	49.2	27.7
Annual presentation / Report to the people	177	0	6.2	24.9	42.4	26.6
Electronic newsletters or reports	178	2.8	9.6	21.3	42.7	23.6
Website information	175	3.4	6.9	29.7	38.3	21.7
News reports about Extension efforts	174	0.6	7.5	33.3	38.5	20.1
Social media posts from Extension	174	9.8	10.9	25.9	37.9	15.5
Printed newsletters or reports	175	5.1	18.3	36	26.3	14.3

County Commissioners highly rated four communication methods to receive information about Extension were personal contact with Extension staff (33.9% very strongly preferred), feedback directly from citizens (27.7% very strongly preferred), annual presentations/reports to the people (26.6% very strongly preferred), and electronic newsletters or reports (23.6% very strongly preferred). Greater than two-thirds of the respondents strongly or very strongly preferred all these top methods of communication.

Two communication methods that received moderate preference were website information (21.7% very strongly preferred) and news reports about Extension (20.1% very strongly preferred). Social media posts from Extension received the highest percentage of do not

prefer responses (9.8%) followed by printed newsletters or reports (5.1%) as indicated in Table 9 above.

Findings Related to Objective 4

The fourth research objective of this study is to identify the evaluation criteria used by County Commissioners to determine the effectiveness of Cooperative Extension. The instrument used 11 evaluation items with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=not at all important, 2=slightly important, 3=moderately important, 4=very important, 5=extremely important). Additionally, respondents were asked to specify if there is any other item they use to evaluate the work of NCCE and rate it on the 5-point Likert-type scale.

The five highest-ranking evaluation criteria used by County Commissioners were cost savings or increased earnings of clients (44.5% extremely important), economic impacts (39.9% extremely important), knowledge/skills gained by clients (37.5% extremely important), underserved clients receiving services (36.5% extremely important), and environmental impacts (36.0% extremely important) (See Table 10). The next level rated evaluation criteria were BMPs implemented by clients (32.6% extremely important), health and wellness improvement (28.7% extremely important), number of clients served (26.7% extremely important), social impacts (22.2% extremely important), and upcoming programs (18.8% extremely important). The lowest rated item was recent event attendance (14.8% extremely important).

Table 10

County Commissioners' Evaluation Criteria Responses Ranked by Extremely Important

Evaluation Criteria	n	Percent of Respondents Indicated Importance				
		Not At All	Slightly	Moderately	Very	Extremely
Cost Savings or Increased Earnings of Clients	173	0	1.7	9.2	44.5	44.5
Economic Impacts	178	0	1.1	11.2	47.8	39.9
Knowledge/Skills Gained by Clients	176	0	0.6	8.5	53.4	37.5
Underserved Clients Receiving Services	170	0	5.3	13.5	44.7	36.5
Environmental Impacts	178	0	1.1	15.2	47.8	36.0
BMPs Implemented by Clients	175	0	1.1	13.1	53.1	32.6
Health and Wellness Improvement	178	1.7	3.4	19.1	47.2	28.7
Number of Clients Served	176	1.7	0.6	23.9	47.2	26.7
Social Impacts	180	0.6	3.9	29.4	43.9	22.2
Upcoming Programs	176	0.6	2.8	23.9	54.0	18.8
Recent Event Attendance	176	0.6	9.1	39.2	36.4	14.8

Respondents were also provided the opportunity to write-in responses to this prompt when selecting the “other” option. Selected written responses include “access to services,” “attracting those needing the service methodology,” “educating clients,” “one on one help,” and “knowledge of/access to extension” which seem related to the question item of “underserved clients receiving services.” Some Commissioner responses were related to customer satisfaction, such as, “support clients and follow up,” “enjoyable,” and “valued resource for farmers and non-farmers.” Other comments like “leadership,” “buying local foods,” and “strengthening agribusiness” may be options for considerations to include in future research to determine the prevalence of additional evaluation criteria which are important to this stakeholder group.

Findings Related to Objective 5

The fifth research objective of this study was to determine whether there is any correlation between County Commissioners’ perceptions about the performance of Cooperative

Extension and their demographic variables. These variables include a County Commissioner's age, years of service, levels of education, involvement in Extension, whether constituents are urban, suburban, or rural, and importance of agriculture to County economy. A 10-item instrument with a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 4=somewhat agree, 5=strongly agree) recorded County Commissioners' perceptions toward NCCE (Table 11). Responses to all 10 items on this scale were aggregated to get County Commissioners' overall perception toward NCCE. The overall perception as measured on this instrument can range from 10 being very negative perception to 50 being very positive perception toward NCCE.

Statistical analysis revealed four correlations between the overall perception toward NCCE and the different demographic variables investigated in this study. These are summarized in Table 11. The overall perception of County Commissioners toward NC Cooperative Extension is positively correlated (0.228) with their perceived importance of agriculture to the County's economy. This correlation is significant at the $p < 0.01$ level (2-tailed). So, Commissioners who feel that agriculture is important to their local economy are more likely to have a positive perception of Extension.

Also, how important the value of agriculture a Commissioner's feels toward the County economy is positively correlated (0.153) with increasingly rural constituencies. This correlation is significant at the $p < 0.05$ level (2-tailed). Commissioners from rural counties are the most likely to have higher economic importance of agriculture.

Finally, involvement in Extension activities was found to be positively correlated (0.219) with the importance a Commissioner placed on agriculture in the local economy. The finding is significant at a p-value of less than 0.01 (2-tailed). This means that Commissioners who feel that

agriculture is more important in their local economy are more likely to be involved in Extension activities as well.

Table 11

Correlations between County Commissioners' Perception toward NC Cooperative Extension and Their Demographics

Variables	OP	IA	Age	WC	YS	LE	IE
Overall perception toward NCCE (OP)	-						
Importance of agriculture to the county economy (IA)	.228**	-					
Age	.142	.015	-				
Whether constituents are urban, suburban, or rural (WC)	-.073	.153*	-.124	-			
Years of service (YS)	.121	.048	.311**	.049	-		
Level of education (LE)	.009	-.085	-.045	-.079	-.043	-	
Involvement in Extension (IE)	.160	.219**	.041	-.012	.017	.034	-

Note. **Correlation is significant at the $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed), * Correlation is significant at the $p < 0.05$ (2-tailed)

Findings Related to Objective 6

The final objective of this study was to determine suggestions made by County Commissioners to build a stronger working relationship between Cooperative Extension and County Government. The survey instrument included a text entry question of: “What would you suggest to make a stronger working relationship between Cooperative Extension and your County Government?” Responses were received from 80 of the 185 respondents and were classified into themes by the researcher based on comparable words, phrases, and content within the comments. Full comments are included in the Appendix and a summary is depicted in Table 12 below.

Table 12

Suggestions to Improve the Relationship: Comments by theme

Theme of Comments	<i>n</i>	Percentage of 80
Improve Internal Communication	30	37.5
Existing Relationship is Good	27	33.75
Additional Collaboration	26	32.5
Increase Marketing Efforts	10	12.5
Address Funding and Staffing	5	6.25
Total (N=80 responses, some overlap)	98	122.5

Note: 80 typed responses were received, some of which applied to multiple categories. Percentage is based on 80 responses ($n/80=%$) rather than 98 themed instances.

Communication was the most frequently identified theme (37.5%, $n=30$) of open responses from the Commissioners to strengthen the relationship between County Government and Cooperative Extension. One individual recommended an “annual report to Commissioners related to the past years programs, new and old, and report on participation from the citizens in some of the programs. Not everything, just highlights of the year. Our meetings are televised and would be good for the citizens to hear.” Effective communication is sensitive to the needs of others as one Commissioner suggests, “having them learn what county government needs to hear from them, and it is not every single thing they do.” And to summarize this theme, a Commissioner responded, “Communication between the two partners is important. This allows each to have a better understanding to the opportunities and challenges of each organization.” Only one respondent indicated strong disappointment with the lack of communication the Commissioner received from Extension. “I visit other counties and we [hear] all about the things they do and information they provide to commissioners... we [hear] from our Director when she wants something.” This comment was not included in the total for this category, as it was clearly in its own section because of the array of issues mentioned in the comment.

One third of the responses ($n=27$) indicated a good relationship already exists between these two entities. The excitement and pride of some of the Commissioners was evident when

reading their entries such as: “our Extension office has a great relationship with county government, they work very hard and don’t complain or act entitled, easy to work with (unlike public school system, just for example), and “I love the staff at cooperative extension-- PERFECT!” Another respondent replied, “Our relationship is to be envied. We are kept in the loop regarding any and all events, programs and recognitions. I feel like the kid who made the only "A" in the class...We have it all” (ellipses are by the respondent). Other entries include: “Keep doing what you’re doing. I think you’re doing an outstanding job!,” “Can’t be much better,” and “doing good work, knowledgeable, responsive and making a difference.”

In addition to internal communication and strong relationships, 12.5 percent ($n=10$) of respondents indicated that improved marketing to the public would strengthen Cooperative Extension. Some of the responses pointed to the problem: “many people don't know what extension does, needs more explanation as to what you do,” I believe there are many citizens who are not aware of how Cooperative Extension has diversified its services,” and simply “need more people listening.” Other comments suggested solutions such as “More publicity in today's avenues of events, social media (tweet, FB posts on their own page sharing events) campaign...,” “social media and electronics,” and “more visibility.” So, although social media was not a preferred communication for many Commissioners, some feel it is important for external communication with Extension audiences and potential clients. Other comments along this theme suggested “perhaps information fairs and other opportunities to share directly with the public will be helpful,” “the American public needs to have a greater understanding of what [agriculture] does for them-- it's not in the movies,” and straightforwardly “get in contact with more people.”

One last collection of comments was amassed around the topic of additional efforts and opportunities (n=26). Many of these included the word “more,” indicating an increase in activity or additional local collaboration would strengthen Extension and its relationship with County Government. Remarks included: “expand services – get to more people,” “become more integrated into our economic development and land use discussions and processes,” “expanding partnerships with the [County Name] School System, the [County Name] Soil and Water Conservation District, and with community organizations (HOA’s, COA’s) to increase the number of ‘community gardens.’ Increase efforts to market the Master Gardeners program to all segments of our community,” and “proactive in counties short/long range planning.”

Funding and staffing changes were also mentioned by a small number (n=5) of Commissioners. These comments included positive ones like “continue strong support from NC State, crucial to the future of the program and a solid investment by NCSU.” There were also comments that indicated a gap in satisfaction: “increase state funding to keep adequate staff,” and “expand services-- get to more people-- but need state funding to do it.” Remarks such as these point to a potential need to revisit the details of local agreements and Memoranda of Understanding.

Summary

This chapter shared the results of this study with explanations of the data and analyses performed on the information provided by County Commissioners in North Carolina regarding their perceptions of Extension. Findings related to the six different research objectives were revealed. Respondents are distributed statewide, serve mostly in rural Counties (reflective of the state as a whole), generally feel that agriculture is very or extremely important to the local economy, have an average age of nearly 63 years, have been in office an average of 7.65 years, 7

out of 10 have earned a post-secondary degree, and they have generally been involved in some way in Cooperative Extension.

Performance perceptions, communication methods, and evaluation criteria findings were detailed in this chapter. As for performance perceptions, four items showed the most agreement among Commissioners: Extension adds value to our community, makes positive impacts, is an effective organization, and aligns with my County goals/vision. The top four communication methods Commissioners preferred were: personal contact with Extension staff, feedback directly from citizens, annual presentations/reports to the people, and electronic newsletters or reports. The five highest-ranking evaluation criteria used by County Commissioners were cost savings or increased earnings of clients, economic impacts, knowledge/skills gained by clients, underserved clients receiving services, and environmental impacts.

Correlations between the variables were also discussed in this chapter. Findings include: Commissioners who feel that agriculture is important to their local economy are more likely to have a positive perception of Extension, and Commissioners from rural counties are most likely to have higher economic importance of agriculture. Also, Commissioners who feel that agriculture is more important in their local economy are more likely to be involved in Extension activities.

Suggestions from Commissioners for strengthening the relationship between Cooperative Extension and County Government were grouped around several themes. The most common theme was a valuable and strong existing relationship, while the theme with the lowest frequency was a small, though significant, set of remarks from individuals who expressed dissatisfaction with their current relationship with Cooperative Extension. Communication with Commissioners

was another strong theme, with additional comments grouped around marketing, opportunities for additional efforts, and funding and staffing.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter discusses conclusions based on the results of this research study and presents recommendations for practice and future research. The purpose of this study was to determine County Commissioner perceptions of Extension performance, their preferred communication methods, and evaluation criteria for determining the effectiveness of Cooperative Extension. Conclusions and recommendations are presented by objective followed by recommendations for further study

Conclusions Related to Objective 1

The first study objective was to determine the demographic characteristics of County Commissioners and their Counties. The majority of North Carolina Counties are rural with a small group of urban centers with a significant amount of suburban areas (NC Rural Center, 2015), but respondents tended to select suburban at a much higher rate. This under-emphasis on rural and urban characteristics may be due to the respondents who chose to answer that question, or there may be something else occurring. Commissioners may have a different standard than the NC Rural Center definition (which aligns with the US Census Bureau), they may be attempting to be more moderate than either urban or rural, or there may be another explanation.

Nearly all of the Commissioners (94.3%) feel that agriculture is very or extremely important to their local economy. The “number one industry in North Carolina, agriculture and agribusiness, including food, forestry and fiber, contributes \$84 billion to the state's economy” (NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, 2019, About North Carolina agriculture section, para. 1). While tourism and military economic impacts may be higher in some individual

counties, overall, Agriculture creates the largest economic impact in the state, and the Commissioners are reflecting this situation in their observations.

The average age of North Carolina County Commissioners was 63 years with a range of 30 to 85. They have served from one to 29 years, though most have only a few years of experience as the median for this data set was 6 years.

Three out of five of these local leaders have attended Extension events, one in four have volunteered, and a fifth have a child who was or is a 4-H member. Only 14% have no prior involvement in Extension. As a result, the majority of Commissioners have some basic understanding of Cooperative Extension, which could be utilized to enhance what County Commissioners already know about the organization and share information related to their prior involvement. For example, a Commissioner whose children were involved in 4-H might be interested in success stories from the local 4-H program. It implies that information be included about all of Extension so that any positive perceptions about one specific program area overflow into the other program areas mentioned in positive communication about the organization based on cognitive attributional processing (Sjovall, 2004).

Nearly a fourth of the County Commissioners have attended some college, one third have a Bachelor's degree, and one in five have a Master's, Doctorate, or other professional degree. Presumably, most Commissioners across North Carolina have a framework or appreciation for higher education since about 70% have earned a post-secondary degree, so this could be a starting point for conversations about how Extension brings research from the Universities to the people of their County.

Conclusions Related to Objective 2

The second objective of this study was to determine County Commissioners' performance perceptions about the effectiveness of Cooperative Extension. The performance measures receiving the highest agreement were: Extension adds value to the community, makes positive impacts, is an effective organization, and aligns with my County goals/vision. Similar to this finding, Lindstrom (2007) found that 93% of County Commissioners in Washington state felt that "WSU Extension provided a good value for the County expenditure" (p. 57) and 67% felt Extension was effective in programming, 84% indicated that the organization is cost-effective, and 84% felt the programs and services were important. Alignment with county priorities is an important aspect of effectiveness. Steinbarger (2005) suggested that if Extension were to "more explicitly align the work of local Extension offices to county priorities and build in accountability standards...this could increase the perception of county partners that Extension constitutes an essential service to county residents" (MOA section, para. 3).

Sharing the amount of information County Commissioners need to make decisions about programs and delivering programs to people who might not access it otherwise were the two lowest rated items among these elected officials. These topics were also mentioned in the comments provided by Commissioners at the end of the survey instrument. There is, apparently, not a problem with over-communication in this audience. So, if a local Extension leader feels that they are communicating enough with County Commissioners, they are probably just getting started (and they need to make sure they are using preferred methods for the individuals on their local commission).

Overall, Cooperative Extension is perceived as performing well in the state and has room to improve in communication. Strengths are evident in aligning with local needs and effectively

making positive impacts. This conclusion aligns with Blalock's (1963) study of 145 North Carolina Legislators that found 63% perceived "that the entire population [of the state] had received some benefit" (p. 256) from Cooperative Extension. Cannizzaro (2007) also found that "overall importance [of Extension programs and services] was classified in the "Agree" category" (p. 103).

Conclusions Related to Objective 3

The third objective of this study was to determine County Commissioners' communication preferences in receiving information about Extension impacts and efforts. Personal contact was overwhelmingly preferred by Commissioners – both from Extension staff and from citizens directly. Such findings show that getting to know – or at least getting in touch with - local elected officials is an effective and preferred way to share information with Commissioners to facilitate well-informed decisions regarding Extension. Personal contact was not defined in the survey instrument, so this may not necessarily be face to face communication. Telephone calls, individual letters, and other forms of communication may be as effective as a scheduled meeting or conversation at an event. Additional research could confirm this possibility.

This finding aligns with findings from the Blalock (1963) study, "seven out of ten legislators identified their contact with and observation of the local Extension staff as the one most important source of information and influence in helping to shape their perception of the Extension Service" (p. 259). Similarly, Wahl (1989) found in a Michigan study that "personal contact, especially at the local CES level, was the method by which a majority of legislators preferred to receive information about the CES" (p. 83).

County Commissioners preferred annual presentations or reports to receive information about Cooperative Extension compared to electronic newsletters, websites, news reports about Extension efforts, or social media posts. There was not any opposition to the use of annual presentations or reports from any respondents. As a result, local Extension staff should include an annual report to Commissioners in their annual plans of work.

Social media posts from Extension received the highest percentage of do not prefer responses. As a result, Extension staff should tread lightly when seeking to educate local leaders about Extension efforts, results and plans through social media. These survey results do not suggest that social media is not an effective or efficient form of communication; the findings do show that social media is not a preferred method by which Commissioners make decisions. This may be a perfectly adequate venue to share program input and output data, such as upcoming program notifications and highlights of a recent successful event. However, outcome and impact data may not be the right fit for that method with this audience. Those Extension professionals wishing to communicate important impact information with local decision-makers through social media may be met with difficulty in some situations, while some Commissioners may prefer to receive and easily share the information in this fashion. Therefore, local Extension professionals are encouraged to adapt this survey instrument to determine the local situation, confirming or contrasting the social media findings of Commissioners statewide in 2018.

Conclusions Related to Objective 4

The fourth objective of this study was to identify the evaluation criteria used by County Commissioners to determine the effectiveness of Cooperative Extension. These decision-makers tend to find knowledge and skills gained by clients, cost savings or increased earnings of clients, and economic impacts to be the three most important criteria to evaluate Extension. In North

Carolina, these are common items to report through a statewide Extension Reporting System, so it is fortunate for local Extension leaders that these important criteria are regularly collected by staff and can be easily compiled and shared with those who see this information as important. Although designing program evaluations to assess whether the program inputs produced the outcomes desired, planning evaluation strategies to meet the informational needs of stakeholders and decision-makers is also valuable. Wholey, Hatry & Newcomer (2004) stated that “evaluation designs that measure program outcomes and impact require more time and resources, but may yield stronger and more credible evidence for policymakers” (p. 2).

The second tier of important criteria includes best management practices (BMPs) implemented by clients, environmental impacts, and underserved clients receiving services. These six criteria would be enough to fill an annual presentation for Commissioners at a local level, and to provide plenty of data to focus on for a program report or conversation with an elected official – as referenced in previous objectives. These evaluation criteria should be measured for Extension programs without stopping at this point of evaluation. Evaluate the higher levels on the hierarchy (Bennett, 1975) to share with stakeholders as well.

Items that weren't as important to how a Commissioner evaluated Extension included recent event attendance, social impacts, and upcoming programs. Two of these criteria are justifiably less important. Participation rates and outputs, such as events held, are low-level measurements of Extension programming whereas outcomes like behavior change and impacts like economic or social changes are at the programming pinnacle (Boone, 2002). Although Commissioners would not necessarily be trained in Extension work, they still perceived greater value in higher levels of evaluation criteria. Outputs, such as recent event attendance, a list of upcoming programs, and the number of clients served show activity, but not necessarily success.

Outcomes, such as health and wellness improvements, BMPs implemented, increased earnings, and skills gained show a change in learner behavior. Most of these outcome criteria ranked in the middle to the upper level in the list created from Commissioner importance responses. The outcome-based evaluation shows a return on investment for staff efforts and resources allocated to community needs.

The criteria involving the highest level of evaluation – impacts - fell across the board: economic impacts placed third overall with environmental impacts close behind, but social impacts landed second to last. Perhaps this ranking reflects the more concrete nature of economic and environmental impacts, which can be more easily quantified or observed. Social impacts can be more difficult to assess and explain since they can require behavior change on a larger level. Wholey, Hatry, and Newcomer (2004) stated, “evaluation designs that measure program outcomes and impact require more time and resources, but may yield stronger and more credible evidence for policymakers” (p. 2). It appears that the policymakers surveyed in this study place a high value on economic impacts over social and environmental impacts of Extension.

Conclusions Related to Objective 5

The fifth objective of this study was to determine whether there is any correlation between County Commissioners’ perceptions about Cooperative Extension and their demographic variables. The only characteristic found to correlate with overall perception was the importance a Commissioner placed on agriculture in the local economy. Two other variables were correlated with the importance of agriculture – rural constituents and involvement in Extension, but these variables were not correlated with overall perception.

Other researchers found related results. Cannizzaro (2007) found no significant difference in perceived performance of Extension in relation to population density

(rural/suburban/urban), gender, primary occupation, or highest level of education completed. Cannizzaro found the “highest bivariate relationship with Importance [of Extension Programs and Services Score] was Overall [meeting] Needs Score” (p. 90) with information use, attendance, and suburban constituents rounding out the top four. Involvement in Extension seemed to make a difference in Cannizzaro’s Louisiana study, but not to the overall perceptions of Extension in this North Carolina study.

In the same year as Cannizzaro, Lindstrom (2007) found that 85% of Washington Commissioners who interacted with Agriculture and 4-H programs indicated that Extension was important. Although Lindstrom’s variables are not identical, this study’s only correlated variable with additional involvement in Extension was with Commissioners who felt Agriculture was economically important.

Blalock (1963) had a partially similar finding – “a majority of the legislators possessed a favorable attitude toward agriculture” (p. 260). However, no relationship was analyzed regarding the performance or perceptions of Extension in that study.

Conclusions Related to Objective 6

The sixth objective of this study was to determine suggestions made by County Commissioners to build a stronger working relationship between Cooperative Extension and County Government. Prominent themes collected included an already strong relationship, improvement of internal communication, a need for increased marketing, suggestions for more local involvement, and funding/staffing matters.

The most common theme in the written responses for strengthening the relationship was communication. No shortage of comments was received regarding the cultivation of communication for a stronger relationship between Extension and County Commissioners. This

population seems very willing to share information if asked. The 32% response rate and plentiful comments show that asking County Commissioners about their preferences and ensuring an avenue to act on that information appears to open the metaphorical floodgates to a wealth of information that can strengthen the relationship with Extension. Local Extension staff who ask their Commissioners about how to more effectively communicate will likely receive abundant and helpful suggestions.

An already strong relationship was indicated by more than a quarter of the written responses to this item on the survey questionnaire. Hard work was emphasized in several Commissioner observations about their local Extension office, and even a sense of pride is revealed in some of the comments. Strong relationships should be fostered; the findings and recommendations in this study can help Extension staff continue to communicate in effective ways with their Commissioners. The results of this study can also help locations with relationships which aren't as strong to develop and enhance their relationship with these decision-makers.

Surls (2008) surveyed County Directors across the United States and found “the strongest predictor of a thriving County Extension office was the perceived strength of partnership with the County” (p. 110). Surls also compiled feedback from Directors that the biggest challenge in working with County Government is visibility, lack of awareness of Extension, and Marketing Extension. The comments received by this study of North Carolina County Commissioners is reflective of the perspective of local Extension leaders captured by Surls in her nationwide survey.

Recommendations

Based on the data analyses and conclusions above, recommendations for enhancing the performance perceptions of Cooperative Extension are presented thematically below.

Recommendations are arranged around communications, demographics, the relationship with County Commissioners, and further research.

Recommendations for Improving Communication

Since sharing the amount of information County Commissioners need to make decisions about programs was one of the lowest rated items in the performance perception survey question and since this topic appeared in the comments provided by respondents, Extension must address this issue at the local level. Planning a tailored communication strategy specifically for Commissioners as an Extension unit will help staff to focus on what is important to these stakeholders when they meet their local leaders.

Communicating the outcomes of Extension efforts that are adding value to the community and are effectively making positive impacts in ways that align with County Government goals should be done at every available opportunity with County Commissioners. Overall, Commissioners want more input and information about Extension, so get them the data they need in the ways they prefer to further develop the positive performance perceptions of Extension efforts among these decision makers.

Regarding preference, respondents selected personal contact with staff, personal contact with clients, annual reports, and electronic newsletters or reports as the most highly preferred methods of communication. This should be verified at a local level to determine if local preferences vary and to tailor communication efforts to the local audience. The questions and

results of this survey instrument can be used as a conversation starter with local elected officials and other stakeholders to clarify the desires and needs of individuals.

Extension Directors should make a priority of personal contact with County Commissioners. Based on the preference of individual contact with staff and the public, local Extension leaders should work towards having a close working relationship with each Commissioner. Local Advisory Council members should also be equipped and encouraged to connect with Commissioners regarding efforts, successes, plans, and needs of Cooperative Extension. The researcher fully understands that personal contact with County Commissioners is not always possible, especially in urban situations. However, the data show a clear preference for personal contact, so if the staff are unable to do so on a consistent basis, County Extension Directors are encouraged to communicate by way of clients, volunteers, and others who can personally share their own stories of Extension's impact with these decision makers.

Further, since there was no opposition to the use of annual presentations or reports as a communication method from any of the respondents, CEDs should, if they do not already, begin planning and delivering annual presentations. A special effort should be made to develop effective presentations that focus on the performance measures and evaluation criteria mentioned elsewhere in this study. Electronic newsletters and reports can underscore and supplement the annual presentation. Social Media posts, on the other hand, should be utilized with the understanding that the current population of County Commissioners may not be as responsive to a Facebook or Twitter marketing campaign based on the responses to this survey research at this time.

As for what to communicate, County Commissioners in North Carolina are inclined to find knowledge and skills gained by clients, cost savings or increased earnings of clients, and

economic impacts to be the three most important criteria to evaluate Extension. As a result, Extension should highlight data collected through evaluations (which should be planned and conducted for every program) and the statewide Extension Reporting System when communicating with County Commissioners. Given that these are the three most important criteria, and interactions with decision-makers are often pressed for time, Extension leaders should focus on the knowledge and skills clients have learned at recent programs, how they are saving or making money, and the economic impacts these Extension efforts are creating or supporting.

Communication improvement was a consistent theme in the data from this study. Increasing the quantity of high impact information coming from Extension to Commissioners, and perhaps to the public, is a necessary take-home message for all Extension leaders and staff. Extension should err on the side of effective communication if ever this is in question and continue improving the communication until clear feedback indicates otherwise.

The results of this study of local elected officials is similar to Blalock's – there are many positive aspects to the communication and relationship between County Commissioners and Extension, and their desires for improvement have been made known. It is past time for NC Cooperative Extension to communicate the information our decision-makers at all levels need through the methods that are most effective for them. Blalock's call to action wasn't heeded decades ago, but the opportunity remains to act on this body of research to tell County Commissioners, elected officials, and other stakeholders the data they desire in ways that most effectively communicate the story of Extension efforts and impacts. These stories of how Extension clients – their constituents – are making positive changes in their lives and in their communities are worth telling, and the research says they want it. As a result, Cooperative

Extension leaders must make sure these key stakeholders are properly informed of local efforts and impacts with a statewide perspective.

Since nearly all County Commissioners feel that Agriculture is important to their local economy, Extension programs serving agriculture should be communicated to stakeholders alongside the economic impacts of agriculture in the County overall. Communicating this information effectively can reinforce Extension's strong relationship with (and the importance of their service to) this important part of the local economy. Commissioners who see the local value in agriculture should be informed of how Extension impacts such a valuable component of their community. Cooperative Extension is uniquely equipped to share information about the agricultural economy with first-hand stories and compiled data about the changes taking place on farms and in the marketplace at such a local level. Armed with this knowledge, Commissioners and other stakeholders can make stronger and well-informed decisions about agriculture and other related economic issues.

The correlations between Commissioners who have rural constituents, and who are more involved in Extension, and who have overall positive perceptions of Extension with the variable of perceptions of the importance of agriculture to their local economy should be addressed from both directions. Sharing the importance of Agriculture to the local economy should be done at every available opportunity. Increasing a Commissioner's awareness of the economic importance of Agriculture may influence their involvement in Extension and their overall perceptions of the organization while making them more conscious of issues related to their rural constituents.

Getting Commissioners more involved in Cooperative Extension can sometimes be as simple as inviting them to important events; comments on this survey instrument indicated that many Commissioners were involved due to an invitation and some did not participate because

they were not invited. The overall perception of Extension has a lot to do with communicating Extension efforts and successes in ways and with the data Commissioners connect with.

Addressing these issues of rural constituents, Extension involvement, and overall positive perceptions correlate with higher perceptions of the importance of agriculture in a County.

Years of service did not correlate significantly with overall perceptions of Extension similar to what Hudson (2002) found with Louisiana legislators where age and years of service were the only variables that did not correlate with perceptions of Extension effectiveness. Extension staff should understand that a Commissioner who has heard Extension Reports to the People year after year doesn't automatically have positive perceptions of the work that is being demonstrated, and it may not be how they want to receive the data, and the outcomes and impacts shared may not be the same criteria they use to evaluate the organization. As a result, County Extension Directors and staff should do their best to get to know their County Commissioners and develop communication strategies to consistently share the information they need in the ways that they want.

Recommendations for Strengthening the Relationship

Extension should utilize Organizational Development resources to focus on these themes for leadership training, annual reporting, and performance appraisals of Extension Directors. If a local Extension leader was expected to improve internal communications with Commissioners in a structured way, that individual should have to make a communications plan, involve other staff members, gather data, share information, and measure the outcome of these activities. Such purposeful effort, if genuine and sincere, would naturally strengthen the relationship and could be applied to the other themes as well. Marketing, local involvement, and funding and staffing

issues could be addressed over time with such determined, persistent, and purposeful action on the part of County Extension Directors.

Recommendations for Further Research

This type of study should be conducted periodically – perhaps once in five years. Baseline questions should be selected with different questions on each survey instrument that would address pressing or upcoming issues. Based on comments provided by respondents, many individuals in this audience want to share their experiences and help their local Extension office improve the services provided to citizens. Future research should give County Commissioners the opportunity to provide feedback and suggestions for improving how Extension serves the community.

Additional research should be conducted to determine whether Commissioners are receiving the information, they want in the format or through the methods they prefer. This study should be used as a baseline to formulate a communications plan or strategy with later survey research exploring the effectiveness of the communication and how well the communications methods matched the needs of this audience.

Further research could provide valuable data regarding Commissioner satisfaction with the amount, type, and quality of information they receive related to the evaluation criteria most important to these decision makers.

A longitudinal study that included the performance perceptions from this study could prove highly beneficial. Such a study could serve as an in-depth customer satisfaction survey and could be repeated for other stakeholder groups. Legislators have been studied before in North Carolina, but none of the Senators or Representatives are the same after 65 years; the longest-serving member started in 1983 according to Raleigh news outlet WRAL (Burns, 2018).

When Commissioners provided open-ended comments for strengthening the relationship with Cooperative Extension, many mentioned an already strong relationship and one needed major improvement. Discovering and researching these dichotomous groups of Extension units could provide a compilation of Best Management practices used by the Counties with good relationships and a list of barriers to overcome and challenges to avoid.

Lastly, a disconnect was identified between population density statistics in the state and the Commissioners' indications. Respondents tended to classify their constituents as suburban at a much higher frequency than the NC Rural Center (2015). Further study could reveal a misunderstanding or lack of awareness of how rural or urban a Commissioner's constituents really are.

Summary

Findings and Conclusions were discussed in order of the six research objectives of the study. Practical recommendations were made to improve linkages between Extension and County Commissioners. Additionally, recommendations for further research were suggested. To review, County Commissioners in North Carolina feel that agriculture is very important to their local economies and are generally involved in some way in Cooperative Extension. Their preferred communication methods are personal contact and annual presentations. The most important criteria for evaluating Extension include knowledge and skills gained by clients, cost savings or increased earnings of clients, and economic impacts. They perceive that Cooperative Extension adds value to the community, makes positive impacts, is an effective organization, and aligns with County goals/vision.

Perceived importance of agriculture is positively correlated with three variables: rural constituents, Extension involvement, and overall perceptions of Extension. Comments from

Commissioners indicated that there is a strong relationship between Extension and County Commissioners and highlighted the need for improved communication with Commissioners, broader marketing in the public, and funding and staffing concerns. Recommendations were focused on utilizing the research findings to improve Cooperative Extension in North Carolina and to build on the findings of this study.

It is the opinion of this researcher that there is great hope for the future of North Carolina and Cooperative Extension based on the conclusions of this study and the potential that can be achieved if these recommendations become actions. Furthermore, strong relationships with County Commissioners are critical to the sustainable success of local Extension efforts; asking them a few simple questions like the ones in this study's survey instrument can lay out a roadmap for getting them the information they need in ways that work best for them so they can make well-informed decisions about the impacts, programs, and services Cooperative Extension works hard to provide.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Survey Instrument

Start of Block: Perceptions

1 Thank you for your input regarding how NC Cooperative Extension communicates with you, impacts your community, and performs in your County as we partner with communities to deliver education and technology that enrich the lives, land, and economy of our state. Be sure to include your email at the end if you want to receive the results of this statewide survey.

-Mark Blevins, Brunswick County Extension Director

By the way, I was the guy with the map at the First Night Dinner during the NCACC conference and this survey will help me finish my Doctorate. Thanks for your thoughtful answers.



2 How important is each of these 11 types of information to you as you determine the effectiveness of Cooperative Extension?

	Not at all Important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very Important	Extremely important
Economic Impacts	<input type="radio"/>				
Environmental Impacts	<input type="radio"/>				
Social Impacts	<input type="radio"/>				
Number of Clients Served	<input type="radio"/>				
Recent Event Attendance	<input type="radio"/>				
Upcoming Programs	<input type="radio"/>				
Health and Wellness Improvements	<input type="radio"/>				
Knowledge/Skills Gained by clients	<input type="radio"/>				
Best Management Practices Implemented by clients	<input type="radio"/>				
Cost Savings or Increased Earnings of clients	<input type="radio"/>				
Underserved Citizens receiving services	<input type="radio"/>				
Other	<input type="radio"/>				

3

2. Please indicate your level of preference to receive information about Extension's impacts and efforts through each of the following eight communication methods?

	Do Not Prefer	Slightly Prefer	Moderately Prefer	Strongly Prefer	Very Strongly Prefer
Annual Presentation / Report to the People	<input type="radio"/>				
Printed Newsletters or Reports	<input type="radio"/>				
Electronic Newsletters or Reports	<input type="radio"/>				
Feedback directly from Citizens	<input type="radio"/>				
Personal Contact with Extension staff	<input type="radio"/>				
News reports about Extension efforts	<input type="radio"/>				
Social Media posts from Extension	<input type="radio"/>				
Website information	<input type="radio"/>				
Other	<input type="radio"/>				

4

Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following 10 statements about Cooperative Extension.

Cooperative Extension in my county:

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Aligns with my County goals/vision.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Reaches the people who need the services Extension provides.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Makes positive impacts.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is an effective organization	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is an efficient organization	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is cost effective	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Adds value to our community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Shares important information with people who might not access it otherwise	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Shares the type of information I need to make decisions about their programs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Shares the amount of information I need to make decisions about programs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

5

What would you suggest to build a stronger working relationship between Cooperative Extension and your County Government?

End of Block: Perceptions

Start of Block: County Descriptors and Demographics (the easier part)

6 What County do you serve?

▼ _ (102) ... Yancey (101)

7 How would you describe your constituents?

- Urban
- Suburban or Mixture of Urban/Rural
- Rural

8 How Important do you feel Agriculture is to your local economy?

- Not at all important
 - Slightly important
 - Moderately important
 - Very important
 - Extremely important
-



9 How many years have you served on your County Commission or Tribal Council?

10 How have you been involved in Extension other than as a County Commissioner? Please check all that are applicable.

Attended events/classes

Volunteered at events/programs

Member of local or state advisory council

Have a child who was/is a 4-H member

Other _____

None



11 What is your year of birth?

12 What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Less than high school degree
- High school graduate (high school diploma or equivalent including GED)
- Some college but no degree
- Associate degree in college (2-year)
- Bachelor's degree in college (4-year)
- Master's degree
- Professional degree (PhD, JD, MD, EdD)

End of Block: County Descriptors and Demographics (the easier part)

Start of Block: Results email entry



13 Please click "Next" to submit your responses.

Thank you for what you do to make North Carolina a wonderful place for all of your constituents.

You can enter your email address below if you would like to receive the results of this survey. Your address will not be included in the data set to maintain confidentiality.

End of Block: Results email entry

Appendix B

Open Ended Comments in Order of Response

“What would you suggest to build a stronger working relationship between Cooperative Extension and your County Government?”	
1	More publicity in today's avenues of events, social media (tweet, FB posts on their own page sharing events) campaign by a "people person with great communication skills" to get the public "in the know" of programs, initiatives and "goings on."
2	Continue the movement to include more of our population in the programs and what go on at our CE.
3	[CED Name] and his staff have a great relationship with [County Name] County government.
4	our Extension office has a great relationship with county government - they work very hard and don't complain or act entitled, easy to work with (unlike public school system, just for example)
5	More opportunity to interact with the staff through programs and or updates.
6	Frequent updates as to how clients and citizens are participating in programs
7	We have a strong relationship. No suggestions.
8	I visit other counties and we here all about the things they do and information they provide to commissioners. In [County Name] County we here from our Director when she wants something. Our Director consistently bad mouths elected officials in our community because we don't share the same views. In election season she openly campaigns while supposedly working. We have farmers that will not use cooperative extension for various reasons and will instead pay for the services from a consultant. We have great agents that I know and talk with actually all of them but their work and ideas are held back by a director that doesn't understand agriculture. New agents are poorly trained and thrown under the bus by leadership when something happens.
9	Proactive in counties short/long range planing
10	On a per capita basis in urban and surburban environments: this office serves more citizens per dollar than rural offices.
11	Offices close together has helped our relationship tremendously, keeping county officials aware of special events, etc. in life's if their staff
12	We have a strong relationship and i would just continue the fine work that is being done
13	Expanding partnerships with the [County Name] County School System, the [County Name] Soil and Water Conservation District, and with community organizations (HOA's, COA's) to increase the number of "community gardens". Increase efforts to market the Master Gardners program to all segments of our community,
14	Overall, I think we have a pretty good relationship. The more information they can share, the better.
15	Provide monthly Departmental Activity Reports to the Commissioners.

	Maybe we could add them to our agenda to report back on some time frame.
16	Lots of the items above would strengthen our relationship.
17	face to face interaction - Extension Director with Board Of County Commissioners. Suggest: Monthly conversation at third Tues. workshop meeting.
18	More interaction with county manager explaining programs
19	I think our Extension folks do a good job trying to build a relationship and the government does their best to be supportive.
20	Our relationship is to be envied. We are kept in the loop regarding any and all events, programs and recognitions. I feel like the kid who made the only "A" in the class...We have it all. [Commissioner Name], [County Name] County
21	Cooperative Extension has done an outstanding job is building a relationship ship Cooperative Extension needs to continue to do the program The Cooperative Extension needs to continue to be open and available to answer questions and concerns about their services and programs with the commissioners The Extension staff has always done an excellent job keeping the county manager and the Board of Commissioners informed
22	Yes
23	At anytime we can reach our lesser privileged citizens with programs to enhance and improve their knowledge and skills it is advantageous to our county as a whole. The agents in [County Name] are doing a good job at this, however I am sure there are areas that could be strengthened to better serve this group of citizens.
24	Continued partnerships with community organizations.
25	Keep doing the things they are doing.
26	Continue to share statistics and other information so that Commissioners may remain informed on agriculture and its benefits.
27	personal contact with Government at their farms or at over lunch. First name contact.
28	I feel that the knowledge is vague as to the need of cooperation between the two entities. We need better collaboration.
29	We have s great relationship already.
30	Things seem to be working fine in our county.
31	I am not sure how contact are made by Cooperative Extension in [County Name] County. I personally have not been invited or perhaps aware of programs, activities and/or events of this organization.
32	No problem in [County Name] County..
33	Get your questions more to the point.
34	I think [CED Name] do a excellent job in [County Name] County
35	More regular updates, just have annual report at this time.
36	I think they could do a presentation every 6 mouths to the commissioners.
37	No suggestions, we have a good relationship with our Cooperative Extension

38	Keep doing what you're doing. I think you're doing an outstanding job!
39	more direct presentations to the board as to programs provided and participation in those programs.
40	Provide a brief quarterly summary of activities offered and the number of participants.
41	Stay away from the easy way. And communicate face to face. As you can tell I don't like email. Talk
42	Share with the BOC what they are not getting in the way of support and funding. Where they see the Extension in 2 & 5 years. Who they hope to reach.
43	I believe there are many citizens who are not aware of how Cooperative Extension has diversified its services. Perhaps information fairs and other opportunities to share directly with the public will be helpful.
44	Annual report to Commissioners related to the past years programs, new and old, and report on participation from the citizens in some of the programs. Not everything, just highlights of the year. Our meetings are televised and would be good for the citizens to hear...5 to 8 minutes...just highlightong "good things from past year.
45	I feel we have a strong staff and does well working with the county.
46	Communication between the two partners is important. This allows each to have a better understanding to the opportunities and challenges of each organization.
47	We have a strong relationship. Continue to share reports and programming in a variety of media formats.
48	More staff on the ground especially in rural areas.
49	Women married or single need more ed & social programs.
50	Continue strong support from NC State, crucial to the future of the program and a solid investment by NCSU
51	Become more integrated into our economic development and land use discussions and processes.
52	Continue being invited to extension events. Being informed & invited to meet with Dr. Bonano & others of significant leadership level are in our county.
53	your doing good work, knowledgeable, responsive and making a difference
54	We have a strong relationship.
55	More direct contact with the board of commissioners.
56	Increase state funding to keep adequate staff
57	Cooperative Extension keeps the Commissioners in the loop by regular appearances at our meetings. New associates, when applicable, are brought to the board as a courtesy introductory appearance. We are made aware of pertinent happenings with Cooperative Extension.
58	continued personal contact through updates, meeting presentations, invitations to programming.
59	Monthly email with what's going on.
60	It's working fine now.

61	Having them learn what county government needs to hear from them, and it is not every single thing they do.
62	More communication. A lot of people still don't know what all you do. More visibility.
63	Teach and Train-- not just how to pass audits. Get back to basics from 40 years ago... get to the farms. See attached comments regarding other questions.
64	Good relationships-- rebrand agricultre marketing-- the american public needs to have a greater understanding of what agricultlure does for them-- it's not in the movies. See attached comments.
65	Need more people listening.
66	I love the staff at cooperative extension-- PERFECT!
67	Present information at least quarterly in fron tof board as to what is coming up and what they are doing. See attached comments.
68	More correspondence from extension
69	Farmer's Market. See attached comments.
70	Social media and electronics.
71	Communication could always be improved.
72	Good relationship
73	Can't be much better.
74	More visibility, getting more programs to the unserved.
75	After School Program
76	Obvious that the staff is trying to get more involved. They have a lot of new people.
77	People need to have a greater knowledge of what extension does. Get in contact with more people.
78	More interaction... most people don't know what extension does. See additional comments
79	Many people don't know what extension does, needs more explanation as to what you do.
80	Expand services-- get to more people-- but need state funding to do it.

Note. Names of County Extension Directors and Counties have been replaced for anonymity. Any mention of "attached comments" refer to other previous questions in the survey instrument that allow for text entry – entries were summarized by section in Chapter 4.

Appendix C

Sample Questionnaire

A sample questionnaire follows. This document can be printed and distributed individually to County Commissioners at the local level. Physical reproductions can be cropped to remove page numbers and enlarged to fill a standard 8.5x11 inch sheet of paper.

The survey instrument does not include the item for indicating one's County since collection is expected to be performed at a local level. Responses can be compiled, and data can be analyzed to compare to the results in this study, if one chooses to do so. Local results can be used for further adjustments in programming, evaluation, and communication with stakeholders and decision-makers.

Thank you for your time to respond to these brief questions. Your input will make a difference as we find out how stakeholders feel about how Cooperative Extension impacts our community.

1. How important are these 11 types of information to you as you determine the effectiveness of Cooperative Extension?

	Not at all Important	Slightly Important	Moderately Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
Economic Impacts	<input type="radio"/>				
Environmental Impacts	<input type="radio"/>				
Social Impacts	<input type="radio"/>				
Number of Clients Served	<input type="radio"/>				
Recent Event Attendance	<input type="radio"/>				
Upcoming Programs	<input type="radio"/>				
Health and Wellness Improvements	<input type="radio"/>				
Knowledge/Skills Gained by clients	<input type="radio"/>				
Best Management Practices Implemented by clients	<input type="radio"/>				
Cost Savings or Increased Earnings of clients	<input type="radio"/>				
Underserved Citizens receiving services	<input type="radio"/>				
Other: _____	<input type="radio"/>				

2. Please indicate your level of preference to receive information about Extension's impacts and efforts through each of the following eight communication methods?

	Do Not Prefer	Slightly Prefer	Moderately Prefer	Strongly Prefer	Very Str. Prefer
Annual Presentation/Report to the People	<input type="radio"/>				
Printed Newsletters or Reports	<input type="radio"/>				
Electronic Newsletters or Reports	<input type="radio"/>				
Feedback directly from Citizens	<input type="radio"/>				
Personal Contact with Extension staff	<input type="radio"/>				
News reports about Extension efforts	<input type="radio"/>				
Social Media posts from Extension	<input type="radio"/>				
Website information	<input type="radio"/>				
Other: _____	<input type="radio"/>				

3. Please indicate your level of agreement with each of these 10 statements.

Cooperative Extension in my County:

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
Aligns with my County goals/vision	0	0	0	0	0
Reaches the people who need the services Extension provides.	0	0	0	0	0
Makes positive impacts.	0	0	0	0	0
Is an <i>effective</i> organization	0	0	0	0	0
Is an <i>efficient</i> organization	0	0	0	0	0
Is cost effective	0	0	0	0	0
Adds value to our community	0	0	0	0	0
Shares important information with people who might not access it otherwise	0	0	0	0	0
Shares the <i>type</i> of information I need to make decisions about their programs	0	0	0	0	0
Shares the <i>amount</i> of information I need to make decisions about their programs	0	0	0	0	0

4. What suggestions do you have for building a stronger working relationship between Cooperative Extension and your County Government?

5. How would you describe your constituents?

- Urban
- Suburban or Mixture of Urban/Rural
- Rural

6. How Important do you feel Agriculture is to your local economy?

- Not at all important
- Slightly important
- Moderately important
- Very important
- Extremely important

7. How many years have you served as a Commissioner?

**8. How have you been involved in Extension other than as a County Commissioner?
Please check all that are applicable.**

- Attended events/classes
- Volunteered at events/programs
- Member of local or state advisory council
- Have a child who was/is a 4-H member
- Other: _____
- None

9. What is your year of birth?

10. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Less than high school degree
- High school graduate (high school diploma or equivalent including GED)
- Some college but no degree
- Associate degree in college (2-year)
- Bachelor's degree in college (4-year)
- Master's degree
- Professional degree (PhD, JD, MD, EdD)

Thank you very much for your input. Your responses will be compiled with other leaders to influence positive changes in Cooperative Extension at the local level. Your time and thoughtful consideration are greatly appreciated.