

# **Assessing County Extension Programs' Readiness to Adopt Technology An OSU Extension Case Study of Two Oregon Counties**

## **Executive Summary**

October 2009

### **Introduction & Purpose**

A case study to investigate the potential for adoption of technology use in county Extension programs in the Oregon State University Extension Service was commissioned by Debbie Maddy and Dave King, OSU Associate Provosts for Outreach & Engagement. Its specified purpose was "to help prepare counties for a future that demands increased use of technology for improving work efficiencies and expanding audience outreach."

A five-member assessment team, including two members of the national eXtension leadership, was appointed and asked to meet with the entire office staff of two Oregon counties on August 13, 2009.

The assessment team was charged with answering a list of questions regarding technology use (both for educational program delivery as well as administrative efficiency), and to test the legitimacy of the following assumptions:

- There is an increased need for education by expanded and diverse audiences not yet familiar with OSU Extension.
- Political viability requires expanding Extension's audience base through quality access to varied education options.
- A growing number of audiences expect that education will be delivered via technology.
- Available resources, including dollars, people and time, will continue to decrease relative to demand.
- Extension's competitive advantage in the expanding technology world is relationship based.

The assessment team consisted of:

- Keith Diem, Extension Regional Director (Team Leader)
- Kevin Gamble, Associate Director, National eXtension Initiative
- Jeff Hino, Extension Learning Technology Leader, EESC
- Dana Martin, Extension Staff Chair, Deschutes County
- Terry Meisenbach, Communications & Marketing Leader, National eXtension Initiative

### **Methodology**

In advance of visits to two counties, three types of information were sought:

1. An online questionnaire (administered via StudentVoice) of all Extension faculty/staff was conducted, to learn what was known about clientele, how technology was currently being used, and to determine their perceptions of barriers and needs related to technology use for programmatic and administrative purposes.

2. As part of the pre-visit survey, faculty/staff were requested to contribute to the Pew Internet & Family Life Project by completing the online questionnaire: "What Kind of Tech User Are You?" and reporting their user type in the pre-visit survey. This gave a perspective on current technology use by the county faculty/staff. Responses were anonymous and only aggregate data were viewable.
3. Background information and viewpoints of the Staff Chairs in the counties to be visited was also requested and shared with the review team.

County visits were guided by following agenda:

- Introduction/Purpose – 15 min.
- Readiness Activity (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ahg6qcgoay4>) - 10 min.
- Review of what the Pew Technology Profiles mean so employees would gain perspective on their current technology use as well as that of the clientele they serve – 15 min.
- Small Group Activity (Key questions and sharing of stories related to technology use by Extension employees and clientele) – 55 min.
- Break – 10 min.
- Large Group Discussion (Reporting key points from small groups and determining common threads) – 45 min.
- Audience Focus – 20 min.
- Wrap-up – 10 min.

### **Key Observations & Findings**

- Faculty/staff don't know what they don't know. In particular, they don't know what technology can or can't do. There is a misperception of the current capabilities and sophisticated nature of online delivery and a broad lack of awareness of eXtension.
- Time, money, and training remain key barriers and constraints to adopting technology. For some faculty/staff, current position descriptions and funding sources may limit their flexibility.
- Faculty/staff really only know their currently-served audience(s). Local Extension programs have often sacrificed new audiences by catering to high-maintenance needs of traditional audiences. There is a fear that they will lose or alienate their current clients if new methods are used.
- Faculty/staff are concerned that technology use (such as online program delivery) will take their service beyond their political and funding boundaries. Compounding that is that County Commissioners and local taxpayers often believe they have complete "ownership" of a local Extension program that is, in reality, cooperatively funded at local, state, and federal levels.

- Faculty/staff have some difficulty grasping the concept of a “virtual Extension office” or “virtual program delivery.” They are largely place-bound, and believe a physical place is a necessary part of their work. Even some younger faculty/staff hold such beliefs, indicating that we often hire in our own image, or that the traditional Extension culture can provide tremendous inertia resisting change. Although somewhat uncomfortable with change, the faculty/staff who are receptive to new approaches may be overshadowed by naysayers who can be strong voices and influences who protest, undermine, and sometimes even sabotage, others’ attempts to go new directions and try new methods.
- Extension personnel believe Extension is traditionally relationship-based, but they exclude technology as relationship-building and assume it can only be done face-to-face. Some faculty members believe they lose their teaching presence if it’s not done in-person.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

1. Extension needs to model the use of technology. Clientele aren't seeing us use it. Faculty need to be progressive and lead the charge. Extension has historically been a leader in adopting new things (hybrid corn, irrigation, etc.) so why not technology?
2. Obtain Extension Administration commitment, directives, vision, permissions. Extension leadership needs to model use of tools.
3. Establish and implement a Technology Plan for OSU Extension based on Extension Leadership directives.
4. Commitment to eXtension, including continued involvement with "Be, Grow, Create" pilot