

Assessing County Extension Programs' Readiness to Adopt Technology

An OSU Case Study of Two Oregon Counties

Submitted by the Technology Readiness Assessment Team:

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ABSTRACT

Strategic Goal 1 of the Oregon State University Outreach and Engagement plan “Engaging for Excellence and Impact” is based on expanding access to OSU programs, courses, and information resources. A key strategy in the plan is to “apply appropriate emerging technologies to facilitate learning and communication.” In order for OSU Extension to contribute to this goal and plan for this future, a case study to investigate the potential for adoption of technology in county Extension programs in the OSU Extension Service was conducted. This report contains findings and recommendations of the five-member assessment team in response to questions the team was charged to answer and assumptions it was asked to test.

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Background and Purpose

Strategic Goal 1 of the Oregon State University Outreach and Engagement plan *Engaging for Excellence and Impact* is based on expanding access to OSU programs, courses, and information resources. A key strategy in the plan is to “apply appropriate emerging technologies to facilitate learning and communication.” In order for OSU Extension to contribute to this goal and plan for this future, a case study to investigate the potential for adoption of technology in county Extension programs in the OSU Extension Service was commissioned by OSU Associate Provosts for Outreach & Engagement, Deborah Maddy and Dave King. 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 spent several months devising an effective case study process, reviewing data, and considering the recommendations to be made in this report. The team provided a preliminary verbal report of findings and recommendations to the Associate Provosts on August 14, and a brief presentation of *A First-Draft Executive Summary* to the OSU Outreach & Engagement Cabinet on September 14 (included in the Appendix).

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:

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

The technology readiness assessment team consisted of:

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

Case Study Methodology

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

- 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.
- 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. (Complete responses are included in the Appendix.) This gave a perspective on current technology use by the county faculty/staff. Responses were anonymous and only aggregate data were viewable.
- Background information and viewpoints of the Staff Chairs in the counties to be visited also was requested and shared with the review team. (Included in the Appendix.)

County visits to Douglas and Lane Counties were guided by the following agenda:

- Introduction/Purpose – 15 minutes
- 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.

Findings, Part 1:

Barriers and Constraints to Technology Use

Time, money and training were identified as key barriers and constraints that keep faculty and staff from adopting technology as useful tools. As Extension faculty and staff prioritize their responsibilities, these limiting factors often contribute to a resistance of incorporating technology with traditional program delivery methods.

Specific thoughts regarding time, money and training limitations shared by faculty/staff included:

- There is no capacity left for adding more responsibilities to positions; there is inherent difficulty in giving up programs that current clientele want and expect.

- Maintaining traditional groups, especially those with a volunteer component (4-H, Master Gardeners), is time consuming; the success of these programs relies on personal contacts and relationships.
- With limited resources, it is difficult to keep equipment and software up-to-date. Furthermore, because technology changes so quickly, it is difficult to remain proficient unless this is one's only responsibility.
- Technology used by OSU Extension does not always lead to accuracy and effectiveness; it may take time away from getting work completed.
- Faculty and staff may attend trainings to learn basics; however, implementing technology into current programs is viewed as an additional step.
- Technology that would be helpful (i.e. online registration, payment capabilities) is not readily available at the county level.

Other opinions shared by faculty/staff regarding barriers and constraints included:

- Current Extension audiences prefer face-to-face instruction.
- Relationship-based programming can only be accomplished through in-person contact and fears of alienating existing clientele if changes are implemented were expressed.
- Extension clientele do not have access to technology and/or do not know how to use it and/or are not interested in using it.
- There is a concern that technology use (such as online program delivery) will take Extension's service beyond local political and funding boundaries.
- Some have the opinion that technology detracts from program value instead of viewing it as part of a potential value-added approach.
- There is some concern with privacy and security issues (i.e. with social networking), especially when dealing with youth.

In identifying the barriers and constraints that keep faculty and staff from adopting technology, the challenge is to determine what thoughts are real and which are perceived. While Extension values tradition and history, it is also founded on cutting edge, research-based knowledge and information that allow extension clientele to be progressive and current.

In an attempt to sort out these thoughts and concerns, it is important to recognize the knowledge, history and experience of Extension staff and faculty, their loyalty to current clientele, their respect of traditions and customs of local communities and their willingness to serve and represent the OSU Extension Service in a positive way. From a progressive standpoint, it is exciting to hear stories of how technology has been incorporated into certain programs and how faculty and staff are being proactive in their attempt to extend knowledge to new audiences through the utilization of technology.

Primary thoughts and ideas expressed through direct interviews with groups of faculty and staff indicate that there is agreement in some areas, conflicting views in others and occasional conflicts with the studies and research provided (such as the Pew data on societal Internet use). Here are representative examples:

Observations of positive attitudes and practices regarding technology:

- "Our clients are ready for this."
- Health food websites are being used to teach nutrition.
- Twitter is being used as a way to learn from clientele.
- Limited income audiences are finding ways (via libraries, DHS, etc.) to access computers.
- Clicker response is being used as an evaluation tool to get immediate feedback.
- A "Computer Buddies" approach is being used to help advance understanding and use of technology.
- Through *YouTube*, there are many nutrition videos available. Staff expressed the need to ensure that information is provided through a reliable source; thus, this serves as an opportunity for Extension.
- The enthusiasm of one person in an office/program area can advance the use and acceptance of technology among the rest of the faculty and staff.

Observations about concerns and resistance to use of technology:

- Current clientele are resistant to change (i.e. people prefer receiving printed copies of newsletters versus accessing them online).
- A belief that if faculty and staff are not out "in the field" doing hands-on-work, they are not producing.
- "Technology is often a waste of time" and it can diminish the value of some learning experiences (i.e. nature and outdoor education).
- People are experiencing "information overload" through the use of technology.
- "Extension is a high-touch organization." Current clients prefer hands-on, face-to-face contact with their Extension faculty and staff.
- "Clientele use technology for work, not necessarily to learn." Clientele not interested or don't have access for doing this; there is a fear of losing or alienating current clients if technology is used.

Research note for perspective regarding a traditional Extension audience:

A nationwide survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) shows that Oregon's farmers and ranchers are among the leaders in their use of computers. Oregon Department of Agriculture reports that these results indicate "computers are just as important to most Oregon agricultural producers as the tractor or any other common type of equipment." 2009 survey results show:

- 79 % of farm operations have access to a computer
- 75 % farmers own or lease a computer
- 69 % of farms have Internet access
- 44 % of farms and ranches use computers for business purposes
- 16% of operators have purchased agricultural inputs over the Internet
- 15 % operators have conducted agricultural marketing activities over the Internet by computer

This research indicates that in some cases, many farmers and ranchers have "outgrown" the computer and now prefer the use of personal digital assistant (PDA) devices. These allow them to be portable while maintaining access to the Internet.

Operators can now use PDAs to combine cell phones, web browsers and portable media players. While the NASS survey did not specifically ask about PDAs, it does indicate how farmers access the Internet:

- 26 % of operators use dial-up service; cut in half from the 52% which was reported in 2007
- 23% utilize DSL
- 23% of Oregon's farmers/ranchers use wireless Internet service compared to a 13% national average

Findings, Part 2: Questions Explored by the Assessment Team

Five questions were included as part of the original charge to this review team. The questions were explored with the county faculty and staff via the pre-visit survey as well as during the county visits. The questions continue to be relevant and the assessment team's observations and commentary in response to those questions follow:

Question 1 - What do you know about your audiences and how do you know it? What are the issues they face?

It is obvious to this team that, in general, the faculty and staff in both Lane and Douglas counties know ONLY the audience they are now serving. They speak "for" that audience in observing that technology will not be important to their constituents or that they have little interest or access to technologies included in these discussions. We were pleased to see that Lane county staff recognized a need to conduct a needs assessment in their county but were unsure if this was to include technology-related issues. It is obvious that both counties are in their comfort zones and made it obvious that going new places related to technology or program delivery tools would be resisted. It was also apparent, in one county especially, that new hires typically maintain the same "technology ethic" as existing staff.

Question 2 - How do you set priorities for focusing on quality service to stakeholders in ways relevant for today's work environment?

Great variability occurs in both counties related to priority setting. It is obvious that catering to existing, high-maintenance traditional audiences is being done while sacrificing the opportunity to reach new audiences. The faculty/staff leading local Extension programs remain in a comfort zone that establishes boundaries related to the relationships they feel epitomize Cooperative Extension work. They remain unconvinced or at least reluctant to believe that technology can assist them in relationship building outside face-to-face interactions. They have great understanding of the need to have tools and technology to help with service and management issues (enrollment, event management, etc.) but do not exhibit the same understanding with learning tools and technologies. In both counties it was observed that, as might be expected, there was little time or energy left to examine new priorities such as technology-assisted learning.

It will be important to harness the excellent teaching skills and content effectiveness that the faculty in these counties clearly have. Translating those skills to new technology opportunities will be challenging.

Question 3 - What programs or educational activities are suitable and adaptable for technology?

This appears to be one of the great unknowns. We did see some early adopters of technology for program delivery in Lane County; dabblers and early adopters. What facilitated this was the presence on staff of a local “expert,” someone who knew the application they were working with and could lead others through learning it. People seemed intrigued with the technology and were starting to link its capacity with the work they needed to do. One phrase that rang quite true with the review team was “They don’t know what they don’t know.” Their skepticism and return to traditional hands-on, face-to-face education was an easy out. It appears that their misperceptions about current capabilities and online delivery makes them feel they will lose their teaching presence. Technology is a threat, a diversion that — when coupled with the fear of doing business differently — places blinders on what they could be doing with technology.

Question 4 - What do you need to be successful in adopting technology to advance your work?

As expected, almost to the person, the team heard both time and money as needs for success in adopting technology. But, coupled with that, staff members also noted that a vision, perhaps in the form of a system-wide technology plan might be important and useful. Such a plan might include incentives/rewards for adoption but also might help to establish role models, mentors, and some very compelling examples of the possibilities they might explore.

Question 5 - How might you deliver programs with greater efficiencies and expanded outreach? (Not necessarily targeting new audiences, but taking advantage of work already in play to expand audience reach.)

Discussion of this question among the team members reflected some of the “aha” moments the staff had as we discussed possibilities for use of technology to assist in program delivery. The concept of “do once, distribute three ways” was appealing as the group discussed it; the use of a blended approach to program delivery, using traditional methods supplemented with new technological methodologies also held interest. Perhaps this last notion was of greatest appeal. Taking small steps, assessing success, and then moving forward was of interest, rather than jumping in with both feet and (in their minds), failing. With access to technology as an ongoing discussion point, the groups discussed some options including places (libraries and the Extension office) where clients/customers might have computer access; and the continued use of computer “buddies,” persons with computer access who print out for or provide access to those who don’t have computers.

The concept of testing technology and technology-related methodologies was viewed as important. It was recommended that as new ideas in this area come forward perhaps testing these ideas in a few counties might be good before going statewide.

Recommendations for Change

The observed uneven nature of technology use in Extension will require consistent and clear strategies and actions to address. While areas of deep mistrust and avoidance of technology were evident to the assessment team, there were also exciting pockets of innovation to be noticed and nurtured. Technological skill levels also revealed a similar polarity. Implementing change will have greatest chance of success if efforts are focused somewhere in the middle of that spectrum.

But implementing greater technology adoption within the organization is not strictly a training problem; motivation must also be addressed. Extension personnel have to see the value and anticipate success in the increased use of technology to carry out their jobs.

A Shift in Philosophy and Approach Needed: Two Challenges to be Faced

Challenge #1 - A Balanced Approach to Reaching New Audiences and Maintaining Traditional Supporters is Key to Extension's Future

- Evidence is strong that a majority of faculty/staff really only know their currently-served audiences. Local Extension programs have often sacrificed new audiences by catering to the "high-maintenance needs" of traditional clients who have come to expect the one-on-one availability of Extension expertise. There is a fear among Extension personnel that they will lose or alienate their current clients if new methods are used.
- Extension needs to become aware of, and reach out to unseen audiences, those that are using technology, and who are currently relying on search engines to locate the information they need.
- A strong case must be made to include new clients by going where these audiences are, many of whom are found in online social networks and using mobile devices as their primary source of information. It's necessary to demonstrate the viability of these potential online Extension clients as "more bread and butter."
- Given the tension that exists within the organization over old and new audiences, there is a need to encourage more investigation and development of "blended" approaches to Extension education efforts, where traditional methods are used in combination with technology-based approaches. It is important to identify what makes Extension unique and capitalize on these strengths in education, communication and outreach.

Challenge #2 - Expanding Extension's Reach in a Global Society While Maintaining Local Connection is a Delicate Balance that Must be Addressed

- 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 the belief often held by County Commissioners and local taxpayers that they have complete "ownership" of a local Extension program that is, in reality, cooperatively funded at local, state, and federal levels ... and sometimes through private sources.
- Faculty/staff have some difficulty grasping the concept of a "virtual Extension office" or "virtual program delivery," with evidence of fear of enforcement of this approach. 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 Extension often hires in its own image, or that the traditional Extension culture exhibits considerable inertia and resistance to 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.
- An administrative challenge will be to create the conversations leading to a new understanding of the mix of local, regional, and national Extension presence.
- It will be important to maintain the interaction that currently occurs between faculty and staff in place-based operations. In an increasingly virtual environment, a higher "comfort level" with online collaboration tools must be supported and encouraged.
- It will be important for OSU Extension statewide through each county office to determine the digital infrastructure, identify movers-and-shakers, and map the technological landscape in each local community.

Recommended Actions to Meet These Challenges

Action #1 - Set the Tone, Lead by Example - The Role of Extension Leadership is Key

Extension Administration/Leadership (including Extension Program Leaders, Department Heads, etc.) can set the tone for improved use of technology in the county offices.

Recommendations include:

1. Demonstrate vision and commitment to the effort. Provide directives to assist counties in setting priorities in technology use. Technological change is so rapid and diverse that it can leave personnel frustrated not knowing where to focus their efforts. A good approach would be a blend of directives along with encouragement and permission to explore solutions based on local audience preferences and needs.

2. Establish guidelines for social media use, recognizing that there may be a blur of personal and job-related usage happening at one site.
3. Administrative leadership needs to model the use of technology. This should include the use of new and emerging technology in administrative communications on a regular basis:
 - Continued and increased use of Adobe Connect as a means of training and information sharing.
 - A demonstrated commitment to increased administrative use of social media through blogging, development and use of social networking media (FaceBook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and customized social media sites using Ning and other tools.)
4. Reward the use of technology by faculty and staff through awards, publicity, and recognition.
5. Incentivize technology innovation in performance review and reporting (PROF/SOARS).
6. Recognize and credit the development of new technology-based outreach efforts and products in the promotion and tenure process. Get buy-in from program leaders, staff chairs, department heads, etc.
7. Feature technology success stories prominently in Extension communications, including the Extension Administration website, newsletters, and presentations. This would include giving counties the opportunity to share their success stories via social media on the Extension website.

Action #2 - Create an OSU Extension Technology Plan

Much of current technology adoption is *ad hoc* and inconsistently applied, leading to lack of awareness of and replication of successful use. A more coordinated effort is needed.

1. Establish and implement a Technology Plan for Extension based on Extension leadership directives and a needs analysis. This needs assessment would sample representative communities (including eastern Oregon) to characterize client readiness and capacity for online delivery of educational programs. The plan should:
 - Address methods for overcoming digital divide issues, including access to technology and bandwidth in rural counties.
 - Articulate a process for adopting proven technologies that includes pilot testing in a smaller subset of counties before a widespread effort is initiated for system-wide application through “safe-fail” technology trials and experimentation.
 - Include a training plan that addresses priorities for training implementation, a social media strategy, and an implementation component.

Action #3 – Promote and Recognize Technology Use

Extension needs to build a stronger case for use of technology within the organization. As mentioned earlier, many are limited by what they don't know — including a lack of understanding of what technology can or can't do.

1. Develop an Extension technology marketing campaign that builds enthusiasm and buy-in by faculty and staff. It would reinforce the Training Plan outlined in *Action #4*. The campaign would:
 - Highlight stories of positive experiences with technology. Too often, negative experiences are unduly influencing perceptions of technology as a whole. Extension needs to model the use of technology. Currently, clientele aren't seeing Extension using technology. Faculty need to be progressive and lead the charge instead of resisting it.
 - Equate high-touch with high-tech. Provide evidence through stories and data that associates technology with traditional values of Extension, including the ability to build relationships to both new and traditional audiences, and enhanced capacity to provide reliable, science-based information.
 - Add a youthful face to Extension through technology by reaching out to young adults (i.e. the "Millennial" generation) through the use of social media, and with products and services developed for mobile devices.
 - Emphasize that technology is and has been a fundamental part of Extension culture, not an add-on. Extension has historically been a leader in field-testing promising discoveries and adopting new practices (hybrid corn, irrigation, etc.) so why not technology?

Action #4 - Provide Resources and Support to Improve Success

Conversations with the two counties repeatedly pointed out the need for allocation of more resources to technology: time, money, and training remain key barriers and constraints to adopting technology. Here are recommendations to alleviate those issues:

Time

Time is the ultimate resource, dedicated in the form of faculty and staff FTE's. As with operational budgets, use of time must be prioritized and carefully allocated as well.

1. Expectation of new activities should be accompanied by directives or guidance on what will no longer be done.
2. Provide more time for development of technology skills.
3. Offer innovative uses of release time for faculty to concentrate efforts to develop online materials, modules, learning objects, blogs, webpages, etc.

Money

Even given the current budget constraints, it is difficult to not state the obvious, but efforts need to be made to provide Extension personnel with the necessary toolset to approach technology-based outreach with confidence. This must be viewed less as an added cost and more of a necessary investment for future viability and success.

1. Provide every county with a basic “media production lab” – that includes a powerful media-capable computer, video camera, audio recording equipment, and supported media production software.
2. Initiate technology innovation mini-grants to support efforts by faculty and staff.
3. With the current budget situation and workload, we must identify as one interviewee commented “who is the easiest audience to reach with the most information in the easiest way.”

Training

In the fast-changing world of technology, the ever-growing array of potential online tools for Extension can be overwhelming. While Extension should encourage the use of many different tools, there is the risk that “a sign pointing in too many directions provides no direction at all.”

1. The Technology Plan should provide a process for identifying and adopting specific tools that have been confirmed and tested.
2. Develop synchronous online training programs using Adobe Connect.
3. Develop asynchronous online learning modules on key technology topics available online, anytime. Specific areas for training emphasis include:
 - Continued Drupal website development techniques
 - Educational use of social media
 - Production of video for online delivery
 - Development of learning modules and learning objects using Pachyderm, Adobe Presenter, and other multimedia authoring tools.
4. Because training needs are not unique to Extension, seek collaborative efforts for technology training with other OSU partners. Consider leveraging technology training and support through OSU Outreach and Engagement partnerships.
5. Develop train-the-trainer programs that will empower faculty and staff to train others in their office on specific technology applications. Teach people how to learn technology on their own.
6. It will be crucial to demonstrate how the use of technology can enhance all of the traditional Extension teaching values of being learner-centric, engaging, hands-on, with the capacity for learner participation in the design of instruction, and building both relationships and community.
7. Provide training for faculty and staff to train their traditional audiences in new technology methods (i.e. computer literacy skills, using social media, etc.). Provide ideas on reaching low-income audiences with technology.

8. Provide training in implementing blended learning opportunities for programs, mixing technology with traditional on-site "warm body" educational activities.
9. Create an Extension Technology Curriculum that demonstrates a scope and sequence, and links meaningfully to other opportunities including Spring Training, and E-Campus Faculty Day workshops.
10. Identify and mentor technology early adopters, and provide them with additional support and resources.
11. Work to distribute the "proximity effect" noted by counties: that being closer to OSU Campus fosters creativity and technology use. Use the technology itself to extend that effect to include the larger statewide community.
12. Demonstrate application of technology using "whole package" training programs where a technology skill is taught and applied, resulting in an end product.

Reassess System for Technical Support Services

A comprehensive, coordinated system of technology support is needed to provide more consistent and timely tech support/help if an increased degree and variety of technology adoption and use is expected of Extension faculty/staff.

1. Current silos should be reexamined regarding support responsibilities. Extension & Experiment Station Communications (EESC) has become the primary Web-related support provider, with the Extension Computer Technology Unit (ECTU) focusing on hardware and non-Web related technical support. This is no longer sustainable, as the dependence on Web resources has exploded in demand and complexity. Future support staff assignments and resource allocation should be made with the contents of this report in mind.

Action #5 – Meet Need for Technology for Administrative/Management Tasks

Administrative technology for Extension is very different from learning technology but such tools are strategically connected to efficacy in delivery of information and services.

1. There was a consistent and forceful message that Extension needs an online registration and credit card payment system. The benefits would not only be demonstrated by greatly increased efficiency, but also by improved public perception of our credibility, relevance, and contemporary status. In addition, this would aid in retention/capture of program clients who view writing a check and delivering it to their local Extension office as antiquated and inconvenient.
2. An online database management tool for tracking volunteer hours for programs such as Master Gardeners, Master Food Preservers, etc. appears to be needed.

Action #6 - Embrace eXtension

The pre-visit survey revealed a broad lack of awareness of eXtension, with half those surveyed using it only a few times a year or never at all. The national eXtension Initiative provides a useful infrastructure and offers a variety of solutions to the public and Extension employees that could help OSU Extension enhance its work and reach its technology-related goals.

1. Extension Administration needs to show a stronger commitment to eXtension, including continued involvement with the "Be, Grow, Create" pilot process currently underway in Oregon.
2. Develop direct links between eXtension and field office personnel. For example, train office personnel in the use of the "Ask An Expert" widget, which could directly increase their efficiency and accuracy in handling phone calls from clients.
3. Encourage greater involvement in eXtension Communities of Practice, (blueberries, viticulture, water, land-use, forestry, wildfire management, etc.) and the development of new COP's.
4. Create individual and county-specific FAQ repositories. Contribute to editing and peer review of FAQs in the eXtension repository.
5. Model and encourage greater use of eXtension collaborative workspaces.
6. Encourage and support attendance of eXtension professional development opportunities to learn about new technologies that could be used in county level programming.
7. Faculty and staff acknowledge the importance of consumers needing a reliable source of information when searching online.

Summary and Conclusions

The Cooperative Extension System is at a crossroads. *The mechanisms of learning and information dissemination in our society are shifting from authoritative sources to people's social networks.* Pew reports that 35% of adults had profiles on social network sites at the end of 2008, up from just 5% in 2005. This trend is accelerating. Facebook, for example has 300 million unique users, and the 35-54 age group is growing at a rate of 276% in 2009. Rural broadband adoption saw home high-speed access grow from 38% in 2008 to 46% in 2009, a 22% increase. *This trend is not to be ignored and presents both opportunities and threats to Cooperative Extension's position of being a trusted source of research-based information and education.*

The technology readiness assessment in Lane and Douglas Counties brought to the surface many organizational and personnel issues needing a total organization effort to address. The two counties selected for assessment were deemed to be representative of both spectrums of OSU Extension audiences: an urbanized county with a major research university, and a rural county with an economy driven by natural resources (i.e. the forest industry). The current county-based delivery of Extension education is failing to serve a progressive and growing constituency that not only desires, but expects to find all forms of education and information online. *These online audiences will not participate in more traditional Extension educational offerings, and ignoring their needs threatens the future viability of the Extension system.*

Underserved online audiences are obviously not restricted to Douglas and Lane Counties. Serving them is a local, state, and national concern. In order to meet their needs, Extension needs to approach these audiences in new ways. Online constituents transcend geopolitical boundaries, and are not best served by Extension's traditional organizational boundaries. Virtual audiences require virtual organizations dedicated to serving their unique needs just as county educators today focus their educational programs on the unique needs of their local populace. Serving online audiences requires a necessary level of experience and exposure to online culture. *Treating it as an add-on to existing job functions will not suffice. It needs to be an integral and important job function of a significant number of Extension educators.*

It must be recognized that most staff currently working in the Extension system do not have the skills or inclination to work in online environments. Furthermore, for some faculty/staff, current position descriptions and funding sources may limit their flexibility. While it would be ideal if all staff devoted a portion of their time and effort to serving new audiences, this is not necessarily a realistic expectation. Attempts to shoe-horn all staff into an organizational structure that requires them to perform in ways that they do not understand, and are ill-prepared to deliver would be ill-advised. *While professional development efforts directed at all staff can and should be made available, scarce resources are best targeted where they can make the largest differences — on staff who have a desire and willingness to explore working in new and different ways.*

Efforts to expose faculty and staff to more innovative educational technologies should include more opportunities to work across organizational boundaries. From the review team's observation it was impressive to see how one innovative individual in the mix was able to influence an entire cadre of colleagues to work differently. This innovation needs to be spread across the entire organization, and these individuals need to interface and learn from not only other colleagues within OSU Extension but the entire CES. This isn't something that people should have to figure out and feel their way through all by themselves without guidance and support.

That OSU Extension is willing to address, and devote resources to serving virtual audiences is to be applauded. The demand for online services is only going to increase. As it is, Cooperative Extension is rising to the challenge late. Attempting to catch-up when things are moving so quickly is difficult. *It is clear that the predominant CES organizational*

structures are not best suited for this challenge, and that many faculty and staff do not appreciate the urgency of the situation. OSU Extension finds itself in a unique situation: Before new solutions can be enacted, there has to be a recognition that change is necessary. With this assessment, OSU Extension is one step closer to moving forward with a bold new initiative.

In conclusion, the assessment team believes that the five assumptions it was asked to test are indeed valid and has made thoughtful but challenging recommendations to guide the future work of OSU Extension with these assumptions in mind:

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

Next Steps/Need for Further Study

1. The review team urges careful and prompt consideration of this report and its recommendations by the leadership of OSU Extension. An implementation team of representative faculty/staff to fully review the report and determine a plan for adoption of its most promising recommendations may be a wise approach to achieve maximum buy-in.
2. A plan for wider dissemination of this report, as deemed appropriate, should be made — especially to those units or audiences that will be critical for adoption and implementation of the recommendations of this report (i.e. ECTU, EESC, Extension Cabinet, etc.) In addition, because faculty/staff in the counties visited dedicated time and energy to this process, this report, or key elements, should be shared with them so they recognize their voices were heard and their ideas and concerns were valued.
3. Although the case study of two appropriately selected county Extension sites was thorough, very insightful, and confirmed independent observation of other locations by the assessment team (resulting from the varied and extensive experience of its members), the limits of a case study in generalizing its findings statewide were recognized. In other words, there may be differences in other counties that would require further investigation or input. For example, the almost total urban counties around Portland, and the extremely remote and rural counties in central and eastern Oregon may differ from the counties studied.

4. However, *the possible need for further study is not to be misconstrued that no action should be taken until all possible information becomes available. On the contrary, the assessment team truly believes that "time is of the essence" if OSU Extension is to thrive in the digital age.*

We do not want Extension faculty/staff to resemble the people in the video, entitled "State employees" (posted at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GExtogSy-PQ>) ... who are paralyzed into inaction by fear of the unknown, as the world around them presumably moves on without them.)

References

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Appendices

- Results of Pre-visit Survey (August 2009)
- Background information and viewpoints of the Staff Chairs in the counties visited (July 2009)
- A First-Draft Executive Summary presented to the OSU Outreach & Engagement Cabinet, September 14, 2009. (The information contained in it was shared but not distributed.)
- Official charge to the assessment team, June 15, 2009