

“Extention(al)” Crisis: University of Minnesota Extension and Urban Food Movements in Minneapolis

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Introduction

Cooperative Extension was formed by the Smith-Lever Act in 1914 to connect rural Americans to research-based agricultural knowledge. From its onset, agricultural Extension provided technical knowledge to farmers with the intention “to increase the net income of the individual farmer through the efficient production and marketing of agricultural products” (Abraham, 1986). Although Extension played a critical role in the development of U.S. agriculture and rural economies throughout the 20th century, in 2016 the context and practice of agriculture in the United States has changed tremendously. Demographic outmigration from rural areas has eroded Extension’s historic stakeholder base, while a changing information and technology landscape has decreased its role as a rural information provider. In addition, shrinking public sector funding and a rise in public-private partnerships have created an environment in which displaying impact and value are important for accessing financial resources from the state (Busch 2005). These changes have resulted in fears that Extension is losing its relevance (McDowell, 2001). In response, Extension has allocated resources towards programs to support its urban constituencies (Abraham, 1986, Borich 2001), and entered collaborative partnerships with alternative food movement organizations (Dunnings et al. 2012). Still, such historical and institutional transitions continue to pose challenges for Extension’s development in the 21st century.

In recent decades, interest in urban agriculture (UA) has proliferated across the U.S., driven by many of the same demographic transitions that challenge Extension (Kaufman and Bailkey, 2000; Lovell 2010). UA encompasses a broad spectrum of activities, from home gardening to intensive vegetable production on vacant lots. Proponents argue that UA can improve the ecological sustainability and socio-economic equity of food production and consumption, and often work at the intersection of agriculture, food, urban land use, poverty and racial inequities (Durand, 2013). While some components of UA, such as community gardening, have expanded rapidly in recent years, for-profit UA remains limited in scope in most U.S. cities (Kaufman and Bailkey, 2000; Lovell 2010).

Many within Extension view UA as a way to integrate its historic role in developing collaborative agricultural networks, with an urban base (Fox 2015; Colesanti, 2009). However, Extension’s involvement with the development of UA is inconsistent. Institutional capacities and ideological barriers often limit Extension’s ability to provide technical support to urban farmers (Reynolds, 2012; Oberholtzer et al. 2014). Extension is largely committed to its role as “one of education and not of advocacy,” (Taylor and Vandelaar, 2011) despite the fact that technical knowledge is not the most significant barrier to the development of UA (Kaufman and Bailkey, 2000; Durand, 2013; Recknagel et al. 2016).

In Minnesota (MN), this institutional discrepancy is stark. A report by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) on the UA in MN explicitly states the inadequacies of University of Minnesota (UMN) Extensions to support the development of UA. “Extension,” it wrote, is most suited to supporting “gardening and self-provisioning” efforts rather than for-profit ventures. We explore this apparent contradiction between Extension’s interest in UA as a potential resolution to its internal legitimacy crisis, and its marginal relationship to UA, using Minneapolis-Saint Paul as a case study.

Methodology

To conduct this preliminary research, we used a framework of sociological institutional theory (Meyer and Rowan 1977, Thoenig 2011) and political agroecology (de Molina 2013) to begin interrogating the institutional development and actions of Extension and their engagement with urban food movements in Minneapolis-Saint Paul, MN. We interviewed agricultural extension agents, Extension administrators, and Extension agricultural deans regarding Extension’s institutional composition and how this characterizes institutional and individual interactions with the urban food movement. Subjects were selected to represent a breadth of institutional roles within UMN Extension.

Three overarching questions framed the focus of our interview:

1. How do you perceive your role in Extension?
2. How does your work relate to UA?
3. How do you perceive the role of the Extension institution in developing, supporting, and interacting with UA?

We asked further questions regarding Extension’s ideological apparatus, “success” stories in UA, and how Extension creates and disseminates agricultural knowledge. As Extension has multiple urban engagements involving food, including nutrition education and urban youth development, we began the interview with a review of these concepts to focus specifically on the shift of Extension’s agricultural programs to urban areas. However, as the project has developed, the role of Extension’s ‘Master Gardener’ programs in urban farming arenas became increasingly evident. We have begun to understand ‘Master Gardener’ programs, their framework of engagement with urban

communities, and points of contention and collaboration between Master Gardeners, the Extension Master Gardener program, and UA projects.

Situating Extension’s contemporary engagement with urban food movements within the context of its institutional history

We find it useful to examine Extension’s current engagement with urban food actors within its broader development as an institution in the United States. Contemporary limitations and challenges of Extension to engage small-scale, urban farming communities are rooted in historical precedents. Since its inception, Extension either struggled to engage with small-scale farmers and landless rural communities or actively collaborated with large-scale agricultural operations and financial institutions to disseminate information supporting increased mechanization, technological adoption, and specialization. In addition, Extension activities were born out of a desire to professionalize the farming occupation, influenced by late 19th century and early 20th century urban agrarian idealism, fears of global overpopulation and food shortages, and the financial backing of business interests such as chambers of commerce and railroad companies.

Themes	<u>Historical</u>	<u>Interview Themes</u>
Institutional legitimacy	<p>“Crisis of authority”</p> <p>Professionalization</p> <p>Moral arguments: Technology and science to the masses (Danbom 1986)</p>	<p><i>Area program leader</i></p> <p>Extension can improve financial knowledge of urban farmers</p> <p>Improved financialization = UA necessity</p> <p><i>Assistant to Ext. Assoc. Dean, former county agent</i></p> <p>Legitimacy crisis regarding demonstration of value to government agencies and stakeholders</p>
Coupled financial backing and research interests	<p><i>Better-capitalized farmers</i></p> <p>agricultural research to increase productivity</p> <p><i>Agricultural scientists</i></p> <p>embrace production as main research in response to lobbying (Rosenberg 1977)</p>	<p><i>Extension Associate Dean</i></p> <p>Tension between “mission work” and “production agriculture”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mission work = food systems development, health & nutrition, UA - Production agriculture = technical assistance for commodity production <p>If Extension does not improve financial productivity of state’s farmers, risks losing state and university finances; Extension struggles to engage with low-economic return agriculture.</p>
Limited urban engagement; Avoids social and political issues	<p>Research prioritizes efficiency of production</p> <p>Agricultural scientists ignore social movements and demographic change (Rosenberg 1977, Abraham 1986)</p>	<p>- <i>Extension Associate Dean</i>: “We missed the boat 20 years ago...” re. engagement with UA</p> <p>- <i>County Extension Agent</i>: Unclear who is demanding information or from where UA actors are accessing information</p> <p>- <i>Extension documents</i>: Self-described as not a good partner for advocacy or policy change</p>
Institutional Structure	<p>Distributed oversight structure</p> <p>Regional → county organization</p>	<p>Privileges county agent interpretation of stakeholder needs, Extension’s response to UA dependent on county agent bias.</p> <p>Single Hennepin county agent responsible for urban, suburban and rural agriculture needs</p>

Using the political agronomy lens in the context of the United States

Political agronomy analysis has largely revolved around addressing issues of agronomic research and development in the global South, but our work demonstrates its utility for understanding the politics of agricultural institutions and movements in the global North. In our preliminary research, we have used the political agronomy framework to interrogate the politics of knowledge and institutional factors driving University of Minnesota Extension's engagement with urban food movements in Minneapolis. Cooperative Extension's role in the development of U.S. agriculture has also been a model for agricultural research and outreach throughout the global South (Qamar 2005), but its role in the U.S. has changed in response to a number of long-term trends. In particular, the orientation of UMN Extension towards UA exhibits unique arrangements and limitations of partnership and stakeholder engagement in the context of a highly contested site of agricultural development in the U.S.

More broadly, as American agroecologists-in-training, we find political agronomy useful for:

1. Describing and understanding new areas of contestation and change in American agriculture

A large amount of rural sociology and political economy scholarship has critically studied American agricultural development and its intertwinement with research activities and university interests (Wolf and Buttel 1996, Levins and Cochrane 1996, Vanloqueren and Baret 2009). However, massive demographic change is occurring across the American agricultural landscape, with a contemporary emergence of a diversity of agricultural actors such as immigrant farmers, beginning agriculturalists, and urban food movements. As these actors shape food systems and engage with research and funding apparatuses, thorough, ongoing analysis of shifting institutional agendas and priorities is necessary for critically understanding and shaping research and extension activities.

2. Establishing space to critique agronomic research from *within*

Little space is provided within agronomy departments and agricultural research institutions to integrate the production and dissemination of agricultural research with critical dialogue regarding the social, political, and economic framework of research agendas and their manifestation on the agricultural landscape. Calls for interdisciplinary scholarship have emerged to integrate natural science approaches in agronomic research development (Struik et al. 2007, Smith et al. 2014) or include social science perspectives within agronomic coursework (Jordan et al. 2012). However, these initiatives have largely omitted explicit discussion of knowledge politics and power dynamics, thereby limiting critical dialogue and pedagogy in the agricultural sciences. Communication across divergent stakeholders and academic disciplines is key to addressing the wide range of issues facing agriculture in the 21st century. However, as these dialogues remain quite limited, even (or especially) at higher education institutions, we see the "political agronomy" framework and its supporting epistemic community as a key institutional link between agronomy and critical social science scholarship.

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