

NEXT GENERATION

In the wake of state cuts to University of Wisconsin System budgets, Cooperative Extension – one division of UW-Extension – has introduced a plan that will change how the organization operates at the county level and beyond. UW-Extension Chancellor Cathy Sandeen (CS) spoke with Wisconsin Counties Association Executive Director Mark D. O’Connell (MO) about the changes, the importance of county partnerships, and the need to keep Cooperative Extension working for the citizens of Wisconsin.

Q&A

MO: What is driving this review and reorganization of University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension? Is it mostly a question of money?

CS: Absolutely. The main driver of these changes is the \$250 million permanent base cut to the University of Wisconsin System in the current biennial budget. Every single institution and every single division within the University of Wisconsin received a portion of that cut. For Cooperative Extension, this resulted in a permanent \$3.6 million annual base cut. Though we receive additional funding from other sources – counties, of course, in addition to federal sources – state support is critical. This is not a trivial budget cut and it went into effect on July 1, 2015.

At the same time, over the past several years stakeholders inside and outside the

organization have begun exploring a new vision for Cooperative Extension, one that would allow us to continue to serve Wisconsin communities, businesses, organizations, and individuals, in an even more contemporary way. From my travels around the state, visiting various counties and Extension offices, I know that one size does not fit all. Every county has different needs and the proposed changes aim to address these varying needs.

Cutting-edge research remains critical to support the Wisconsin economy. Technology is playing an increasingly important role. As we go through this budget cut, we hope to create a new and improved organization that is relevant, flexible, and digital, one that will continue serving the state today while building the infrastructure that moves us forward.



MO: What will be the most significant changes for Wisconsin counties? Where do you see county governments (and residents) losing, and where do you see them gaining?

CS: The most significant change will be the grouping of counties into “areas” of four counties in most cases. Cooperative Extension has also identified single-county areas for our high-population urban centers. We will provide certain functions on an area basis while maintaining a local focus for traditionally face-to-face, high-touch programs like 4-H and Master Gardeners. All county offices will remain open. However, some county-based staff may have area responsibilities rather than local responsibilities, and there may be fewer staff overall. This is admittedly where counties will perceive “losing” service.

However, our agents and educators will be deployed more strategically. For example, in a multi-county area with high agricultural activity, we may have more agricultural agents and fewer agents from another program area. In an area with high poverty, we may have more family living educators and fewer from other programs. Using broad input from all stakeholders, the implementation team is charged with conducting a thorough analysis and coming up with the best solutions possible.

One thing I need our counties and citizens to understand is that our services will be reduced. We will not be able to “do more with less.” We definitely will be doing “less with less.” Our challenge will be to get the priorities right both geographically and programmatically.

nEXT Generation Implementation Steering Committee

Annie Jones, Chair, Cooperative Extension Associate Dean/Associate Director

Amber Canto, Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program State Coordinator

Amanda Gevens, UW-Madison Associate Professor & Vegetable Crops Plant Pathology Extension Specialist

Matt Hanson, Cooperative Extension Southwest Regional Director

Jon Hochkammer, Wisconsin Counties Association Outreach Manager

Jeff Hoffman, UW-Extension’s Dodge County Community Development Educator/Department Head & UW-Extension University Committee member

Bill Klase, Cooperative Extension Natural Resources Educator & UW-Extension Committee on Academic Staff Issues member

Kevin Masarik, UW-Stevens Point Senior Outreach Specialist/Groundwater Education Extension Specialist, Center for Watershed Science and Education

Rick Mills, Cooperative Extension Program Development and Evaluation Information Systems Resource Technician & UW-Extension University Staff Council member

Kandi O’Neil, Cooperative Extension Associate State 4-H Program Director/Volunteer Specialist

Ruth Schriefer, UW-Extension’s Iowa County Family Living Agent & Department of Family Development chair

I am grateful that county boards, executives, and administrators are working proactively with us as we go through this process. They have gone through budget cuts themselves, so they get it.

MO: What other solutions have you considered that might protect current county-level structures? Could funds be shifted from other UW-Extension or UW System sources, for example?

CS: As I mentioned, these budget cuts went into effect last July. We have some unfilled positions, and funding from those is bridging the gap and giving us time to plan. Our management team has worked hard over the past six months to consider various options. Believe me, they have left no stone unturned. I believe our reorganization plan, what we are calling *nEXT Generation*, is the best choice.

All divisions within UW-Extension received their own budget cuts. We have some reserves, but those funds are a very small part of the overall UW System reserve. We simply do not have internal funds to cover this \$3.6 million permanent cut. We cannot take money from another campus or the System. Each campus and division must stand on its own.

MO: Are county-based programs bearing the brunt of Cooperative Extension cuts?

CS: All Cooperative Extension programs are feeling the impact of the cuts, at the county level but also on UW campuses and in central administration. We aim to reduce our county-level budget by \$1.2 million per year, our campus and state specialist budget by \$1.7 million, and our administrative budget by \$700,000.

Those targets reflect the extent of state support in each area. Campus-based investments are more dependent on state funding, so they are taking a larger cut than county-level programs. Administration receives significantly lower state funding, so its targeted cuts are the lowest. County programs fall in the middle.

MO: What is the timeline for change, and when will counties begin to see an impact?

CS: I created an Implementation Steering Committee and appointed a full-time project manager (Jay Rowan from Huron Associates) in January. Wisconsin Counties Association Outreach Manager Jon Hochkammer is part of that team. The committee began their work last month to design and implement all the details associated with the plan.

It is enormously complicated. The committee is charged with analyzing county needs; business models; workforce allocations; program areas; how counties will work together; the interaction of county, area, and statewide specialists; and, how Cooperative Extension will monitor the plan's effectiveness going forward. The steering committee is creating over 25 specialized work groups, made up of individuals with appropriate expertise and local knowledge, to consider and make recommendations on hundreds of granular details involved in this change. With counties help, we will get it right.

Changes will occur over time, not all at once. Some changes – for example, new job descriptions and recruitments for these positions – may begin as early as this summer. Even though Cooperative Extension needs to cut about an additional 40 positions, no positions will be eliminated or notices given until late 2016 or early 2017.

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MO: What kind of feedback have you received from counties since starting this project? Based on that feedback, did you make any changes to the December 2015 recommendations?

CS: We have received a flood of feedback, as you can imagine. We have logged about 500 individual emails, letters, resolutions, and verbal comments. I have met with county boards, extension committees, and county executives and administrators, as well as statewide producer groups. I appreciate that much of this feedback took a problem-solving approach and provided specific suggestions. We have considered literally every piece of input.

I learned two things from this process. First, the state of Wisconsin depends on the programs and services we provide. Our citizens see enormous value in what we do; otherwise we would not have had so many concerned parties reach out to us. It shows Cooperative Extension's direct and positive impact on this state. Second, citizens and our county partners may not have realized that a cut to the UW System would trickle down and affect them so directly in their communities.

Taking all this input into account, we made a number of changes. We reconfigured some of the county area boundaries. We will consolidate administration, freeing up our county educators to focus more on their areas of expertise, but perhaps in a different way than originally proposed. And finally, be assured that we will address the issue of proportionality—that is, how we make sure each county receives services proportionate to its investments, which may differ on a per capita basis from other counties in its area.

MO: Going forward, how are you going to involve county governments and communities in the reorganization process?

CS: We will continue to seek input. The Implementation Steering Committee and work groups will gather data through surveys and other means. One of their first priorities is an engagement plan that will establish how county-based staff and county partners begin to collaborate and help shape Cooperative Extension.

The work of the steering committee will be shared with county partners as we go through the process so they will remain up-to-date on specific changes and timelines. We are committed to our county partnerships and to an open and transparent process.

MO: What additional challenges do you anticipate? What do you say to county leaders who are concerned about the future of programs they have helped to build?

CS: I am worried about additional cuts to the UW System in the next budget cycle. The institutions I oversee, the UW Colleges and UW-Extension, were already very frugal and efficient. We have stepped up and done our absolute best to accommodate the current budget cut.

To receive another major cut while we are in the middle of implementing this one would present an extraordinary challenge for us and our county partners and could change the face of Wisconsin for decades. I hope county leaders and their constituents can help us communicate this message.