

CAREERS & EDUCATION



MARY STEWART

John Brunoe, an Oregon State University extension service educator, shows young people how to plant a community garden.

At Your Service

Cooperative extensions offer information and resources

By Robin Roenker

ROOTED IN AGRICULTURAL CLUBS of the early 1800s and formalized in 1914, the cooperative extension system (CES) has long been a trusted, community-based resource for information on everything from farming best practices to nutrition and youth development.

With more than 32,000 extension professionals at work in land-grant universities and county-level field offices across the country, “cooperative extension serves nearly all 3,143 counties or county-equivalents in the U.S.,” says Parag Chitnis, associate director for programs with the Department of Agriculture’s National

Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), which supports the work of CES.

“The mission of the modern extension system is identifying needs within communities and engaging community members from the beginning in helping us to address those needs,” says Anita Azarenko, director of the Oregon State University (OSU) extension service and interim vice provost for OSU’s Division of University Outreach and Engagement.

“Extension today is not the same as it was 50 years ago,” says Peggy Compton, a program manager with the University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension, who trains volunteer community scientists

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DONNA GARCIA

Last summer, the University of Missouri Extension 4-H Youth Futures conference was virtual, but in previous years members participated in team-building exercises such as this one, where students built a chair out of limited materials with no instructions.

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– HANNAH CARTER,
University of Maine Cooperative
Extension

to help monitor water quality in Wisconsin streams and rivers. Compton says modern extension programs have a wider range of topics.

“The beautiful thing about extension is that its educators and specialists are very nimble at changing with the times and meeting the current needs of their communities,” says Compton, who currently serves as national president of Epsilon Sigma Phi Inc., a professional association for extension specialists.

These days, extension experts lead classes and workshops on a broad range of issues, from wildlife habitat management and food preservation to senior fitness and small business development.

INTERNATIONAL REACH

Extension professionals often serve as front-line community liaisons for the research and education being done at their land-grant campuses. That benefits not only local communities, but international ones.

At the University of Florida, entomology professor and extension specialist James Ellis leads the Honey Bee Research and Extension Laboratory. In October, he was named winner of the 2020 Excellence in Extension Award, a national honor given annually by NIFA and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) to recognize an extension professional whose work is

making a positive impact in his or her community.

“The videos, website and educational documents we produce and share on our social media accounts are used by beekeepers around the world,” says Ellis. “We’ve been able to help beekeepers at the national and international level.”

BUILDING THE FUTURE

State extension systems have long made youth development programs a priority. The University of Missouri Extension created the 4-H Youth Futures: College Within Reach initiative, which provides mentoring and programming to encourage first-generation, vulnerable and underserved youth to pursue higher education and career readiness.

Honored with the National Diversity in Extension Award in 2020, the program’s success has inspired roughly a dozen other states to introduce the Youth Futures model into their own extension programming.

“We want to help Missouri and other states ... increase their percentage of youth who are graduating from high school and then going on to higher education institutions — whatever that may look like, whether it’s a trade school, community college or four-year college — and then becoming productive members of the workforce,” says Donna Garcia, a University of Missouri Extension college and career readiness specialist, who directs the Youth Futures program.

CONTINUOUS WORK

During the pandemic, extension offices across the U.S. continue to help communities and ensure that their services reach the people who need them.

“The value of this vast network has rarely been as evident as it was this past year, when the system showed how quickly it could pivot to provide much-needed education and information during the pandemic,” Chitnis says.

At University of Maine (UMaine) Cooperative Extension, where youth development is a key focus, extension specialists found ways to continue engaging students with their 4-H programs.

“Our 4-H faculty upended the traditional, in-person extension learning model and within weeks put together an extraordinary 4-H Learn at Home series,” says Hannah Carter, dean of UMaine’s extension.

The online series has shared nutritious recipes and family-friendly tips on how to start a backyard garden and

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MIKE KNUTZ

A 4-H student cares for ducks evacuated during Oregon wildfires.

more — as well as popular Virtual Teen Science Cafés, in which high school students engage directly with UMaine scientists on Zoom to learn about their work.

“One of the few positive things to come out of the pandemic is that we’ve been able to reach more youth — both inside and outside of the state — with our virtual programs than we would have ever been able to reach in person,” Carter says.

DISASTER AID

Local extension offices also support emergency management efforts. The OSU Extension Service helped evacuate

animals during Oregon’s devastating wildfires in 2020. It also created checklists and damage assessment forms for property owners returning to their homes after fire damage, as well as information on damage mitigation and recovery resources.

“We started a fire program (just as the wildfires started),” says Azarenko. “(We) helped communities access relevant information on ways to navigate what happens after a wildfire. (Extension professionals) stepped up, not only in the moment, but their work going forward will also be able to help design more resilient landscapes and communities.”



**James Ellis, head
of the Honey
Bee Research
and Extension
Laboratory at the
University of Florida**