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Tampa Bay Extension Agents' Views of Urban Extension: Philosophy and Program Strategies

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The purpose of this article was to explore the concept of urban Extension as perceived by Extension agents within the Tampa Bay area, one of Florida's fastest growing metropolitan areas. From a theoretical perspective, it is critical to understand Extension agents' beliefs about urban Extension because behaviors are directly related to attitudes (Ajzen, 2012). In 2016, a qualitative investigation was undertaken to explore the perspectives of 23 agents working within the Tampa Bay area. Results showed the majority of agents believed that context and client needs are unique for urban Extension, and that to a lesser extent, unique agent expertise is required. Further, these beliefs impacted how agents reported their approach to programming, with an emphasis on providing convenience and seeking partnerships. Difficulties were identified related to identifying the role of Extension in a resource-rich environment of service providers, which contributed to the existence of a perceived disconnect between urban audiences and Extension. Opportunities exist for Extension leadership to provide strategic organizational support that will enhance agents' abilities to succeed in the metropolitan environment.

Keywords: metropolitan, programming, theory of planned behavior, partnerships

Introduction

The influence of the United States' changing population on how and where Extension implements its mission has become a national conversation. Extension professionals are seeking to develop and implement strategies that will allow Extension to maximize and demonstrate its potential impact in all locations and for all people. This desire has generally been met with a recognition that the original model of Extension was designed to meet the needs of a very different era and it is now time to determine the best model(s) moving forward. New networks such as the National Urban Extension Leaders and the Western Center for Metropolitan Extension and Research have embraced the challenge and have been instrumental in creating the space to have conversations about how Extension should be functioning to meet the needs of 21st century America.

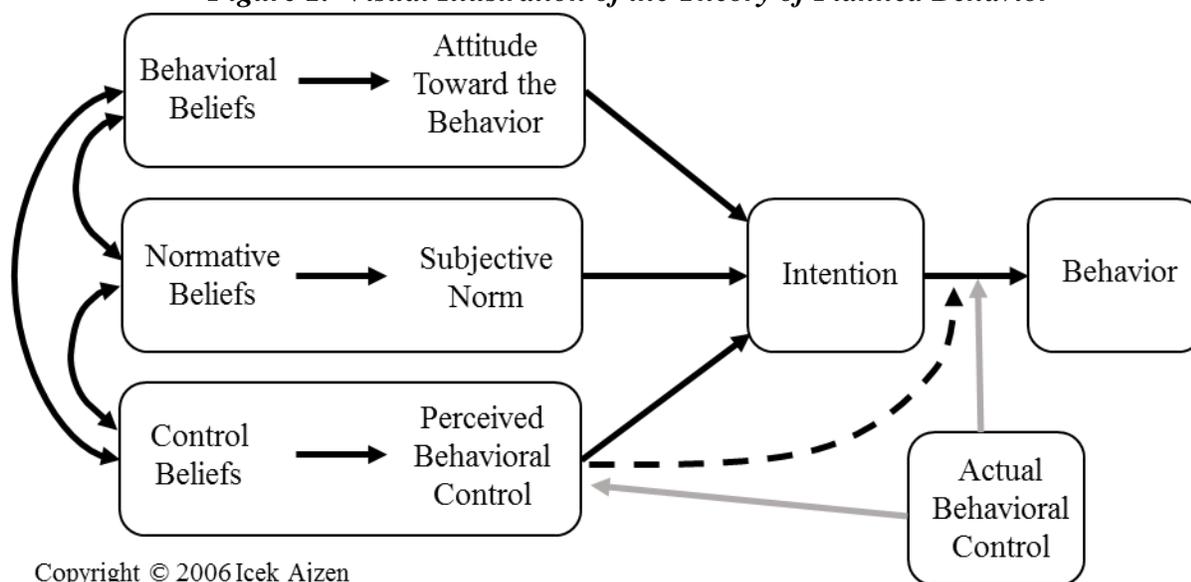
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At the University of Florida (UF), the conversation has focused on developing a strategic plan for Extension in metropolitan areas. In 2014, a select group of Extension faculty across administrative and agent ranks within the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) was convened as an Urban Extension Task Force by the Dean of the Florida Cooperative Extension Service. Amongst the goals for that Task Force were charges to build an urban program that collectively strengthened all of UF/IFAS Extension and to develop key principles for urban Extension. What resulted is known as the Strategic Plan for Extension in Metropolitan Regions, a framework that “identifies a series of quantifiable steps that guide activities and resources to accomplish predetermined outcomes, along with a suggested time frame for implementation and the responsible agency or partnership” (UF/IFAS Extension, 2015, p. 1).

The Strategic Plan (UF/IFAS Extension, 2015) is a comprehensive document which outlines essential elements and performance indicators in the following four areas: (a) institution, (b) resources, (c) partnerships, and (d) implementation. The Strategic Plan is available in its entirety at <http://extadmin.ifas.ufl.edu/urban.shtml>. Upon completed development of the Strategic Plan, the UF/IFAS Extension leadership team held a retreat to determine the best course of action given the numerous possibilities presented in the Strategic Plan. One outcome of that retreat was the decision to conduct an extensive needs assessment within Florida’s four major metropolitan hubs (Jacksonville, Miami, Orlando, and Tampa) to collect the data needed to drive decisions related to the implementation of the Strategic Plan. The 18-month project is ongoing and focuses on collecting data from county Extension faculty and staff as a primary method to assess and prioritize the gaps between where UF/IFAS Extension currently is and the optimal performance indicators in the Strategic Plan. The approach is designed to support the informed allocation of resources as UF/IFAS Extension works to sustain and enhance the quality of human life for all Floridians.

Recognizing the importance of Extension agents within the UF/IFAS Extension system, the needs assessment process in each metropolitan area begins with the goal of discovering what the local agents think about Extension in an urban environment. From a theoretical perspective, it is critical to understand Extension agents’ beliefs about urban Extension because behaviors are directly related to attitudes (Ajzen, 2012). According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 2012), a behavior occurs as the result of intention. Intention is influenced most closely by a person’s attitude toward the behavior, social pressure related to the behavior (subjective norm), and the person’s belief about his or her ability to perform the behavior (Ajzen, 2006) (see Figure 1). Antecedents of these variables are behavioral beliefs, which describe what a person believes will happen as a result of engaging in the behavior; normative beliefs, which describe what a person believes he or she is expected to do by those who are important to him or her; and control beliefs, which describe what a person believes are factors supporting or hindering the behavior (Ajzen, 2012).

Figure 1. Visual Illustration of the Theory of Planned Behavior



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For example, an Extension agent who believes that partnerships are critical to Extension's success in an urban area, feels positive social pressure to engage in partnerships, and believes he or she is capable of cultivating partnerships is far more likely to do so than someone who has fewer positive factors contributing to behavioral intention. Tying this theory back to the UF/IFAS Extension needs assessment project, investigating Extension agents' attitudes and beliefs about urban Extension and what is possible within the urban environment offers insight into how they will actually perform in their roles; therefore, it is prudent to examine agents' perspectives about their work as a central component of any discussion about urban Extension. Toward that end, the purpose of this article is to explore the concept of urban Extension as perceived by Extension agents within the Tampa Bay area, one of Florida's fastest growing metropolitan areas.

Methods

Study Design

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) identified a basic qualitative study as appropriate when researchers are "interested in (a) how people interpret their experiences, (b) how they construct their worlds, and (c) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 24). We felt strongly that it was imperative to begin any discussion about urban Extension by listening to the experiences of the Extension professionals who work in metropolitan areas every day and so followed the basic qualitative study approach.

Context

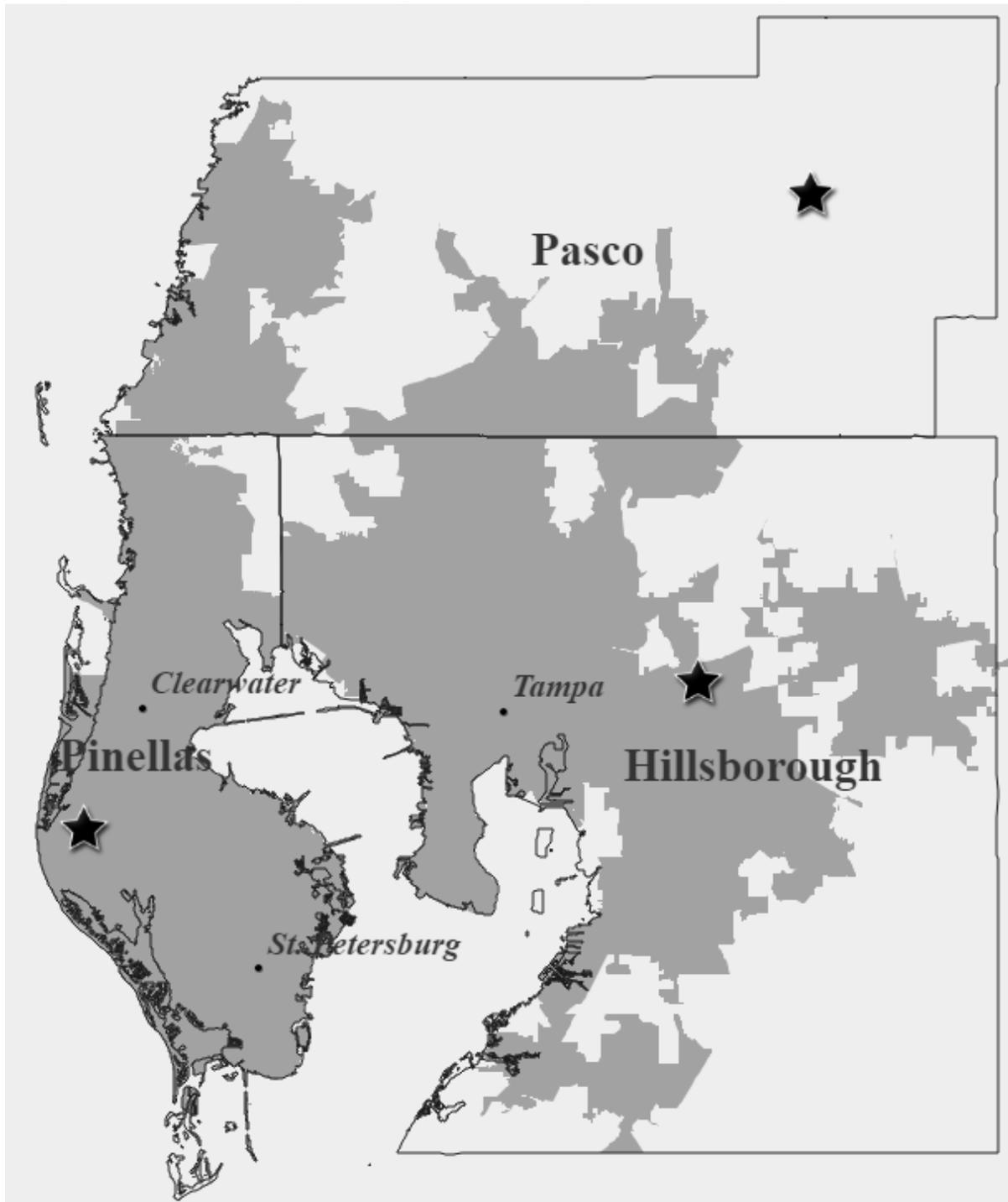
The Tampa Bay metropolitan area is located on the Gulf coast of Florida, approximately halfway down the state's western border. According to the Florida Metropolitan Planning Organization Advisory Council (2010), the Tampa Bay-St. Petersburg urbanized area is estimated at 2,441,770 people. Table 1 describes the population, racial, and ethnic composition of the Tampa Bay-St. Petersburg urbanized area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, 2015).

Table 1. Race and Hispanic Origin (Percent) by County and City in the Tampa Bay Area

Area	Race						Hispanic Origin	
	White	Black or African American	Asian	Two or more races	Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander	American Indian and Alaska Native	Hispanic or Latino	White alone, not Hispanic or Latino
Hillsborough County	75.0	17.7	4.1	2.6	0.1	0.5	27.0	51.0
Pinellas County	82.9	11.0	3.5	2.1	0.1	0.4	9.1	74.9
Pasco County	89.1	5.8	2.5	2.1	0.1	0.4	14.0	76.5
Tampa	62.9	26.2	3.4	3.2	0.1	0.4	23.1	46.3
St. Petersburg	68.7	23.9	3.2	2.5	0.1	0.3	6.6	64.3
Clearwater	79.8	10.9	2.1	2.4	0.1	0.5	14.2	71.1
United States	77.1	13.3	5.6	2.6	0.2	1.2	17.6	61.6

The U.S. Census Bureau's (2010) definition of an urbanized area including 50,000 or more people was used to delineate the boundaries of the Tampa Bay-St. Petersburg urbanized area. The urbanized area included the cities of Tampa, St. Petersburg, and Clearwater as well as smaller unincorporated areas (see Figure 2); locally, the urbanized area is most commonly referred to as the Tampa Bay metropolitan area and will be referred to in this article simply as the Tampa Bay area. Portions of three counties (Hillsborough, Pinellas, and Pasco) were included in the urbanized area. The main Extension office for each county is identified with a star in Figure 2, which illustrates where the office is located in relation to the urbanized areas. All of these counties were included in the study.

Figure 2. Boundaries of the Tampa-St. Petersburg Urbanized Area for 2000 and 2010



Participant Recruitment

Potential participants for the research were identified by asking the County Extension Directors (CEDs) for Hillsborough, Pasco, and Pinellas counties to provide a list of agents whom they thought should be interviewed. The CEDs were also invited to participate, which resulted in a total of 25 potential participants. Each potential participant received an introductory email from one of the researchers and a copy of the informed consent. Of the invited, 23 individuals agreed to participate in the research, one individual declined, and one individual failed to respond.

Given the need to protect the confidentiality of study participants, only a summary of group characteristics is provided. The majority of participants were female. Agents represented a wide range of ages and experience, spanning all four ranks within the University of Florida promotion and permanent status system. All major program areas were represented. A few agents had multicounty assignments, but most were assigned to a single county. The greatest number of participants were from Hillsborough County, while the fewest were from Pasco County, which is consistent with the size of the county faculty in all three locations. Pseudonyms have been assigned to further protect the confidentiality of participants when providing quotes in the findings section.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview guide (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was used to collect data. Participants were asked to describe, "What do you think of when you hear the term 'urban Extension' or think of Extension working in a metropolitan area?" Probing questions were used as appropriate. Additional questions were included in the interview guide, but that data was not reported in this article. Questions covered four categories derived from the Strategic Plan for Extension in Metropolitan Regions (UF/IFAS Extension, 2015): (a) institution, (b) resources, (c) partnerships, and (d) implementation.

Data collection occurred between July and September 2016. Twenty-two interviews were conducted over the phone, and one interview was conducted in person. All interviews were audio recorded and ranged in length from 31 to 155 minutes with an average of 60 minutes. Transcriptions of each interview were created by one of the researchers, reviewed for accuracy, and then sent to the participant for member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Any revisions suggested by participants as a result of member checking were accepted.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) of analysis. Each participant's response was read carefully, and codes were assigned to key

phrases. Simultaneously, memos were kept as recommended by Yin (2011), which helped to organize the codes into meaningful concepts and categories.

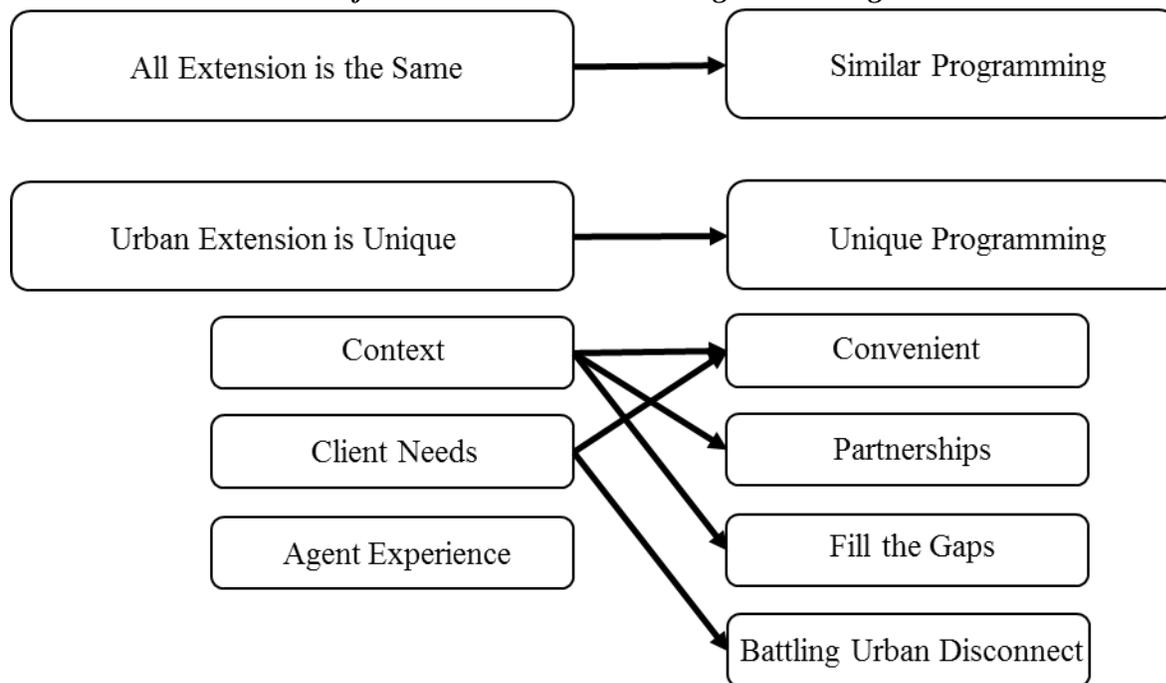
In addition to conducting member checks to improve the trustworthiness of the research, we have provided a detailed description of the context and extensively used quotes within the findings to aid the reader in making transferability judgments (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An audit trail was created to address dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Audit trail records include (a) audio recordings of each interview, (b) interview transcriptions, (c) member checking correspondence, (d) memos, (e) coded transcripts, and (f) written correspondence between the authors during and after data collection. Finally, the use of multiple sources and different investigators allowed for triangulation of the data as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to address credibility.

We recognize the potential for our personal biases to influence the research. The lead author is a strong supporter of Cooperative Extension, but particularly of Extension agents. She, like Seevers, Graham, and Conklin (2007), believes agents are the most important part of the Extension system and has prior experience as a 4-H agent in a rapidly urbanizing county in Colorado. The second author, also a strong supporter of Cooperative Extension, worked in the state office for a UF/IFAS Extension program for two years and has worked collaboratively with Extension agents throughout the state on a variety of projects. Adhering to the trustworthiness procedures outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and described in the preceding text was important to guard against our biases skewing the findings.

Findings

The experiences of Extension agents working in the Tampa Bay area are best viewed through their philosophical views and the program strategies they implement as an outgrowth of their beliefs. Accordingly, the findings have been separated to explore each major theme and its subthemes. Agents' philosophical views of urban Extension and urban areas are presented before program strategies, consistent with Ajzen's (2012) theory that people's behaviors are influenced by their attitudes and beliefs. The data for this study revealed connections did exist between philosophical views and program strategies used within the urban environment. Beliefs about context were the most influential drivers of program strategies as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Conceptualized Connections Between Philosophical Views of Urban Extension and Program Strategies



Philosophical Views of Urban Extension

The Oxford Dictionary (2016) defines philosophy as “a theory or attitude that acts as a guiding principle for behavior” (“Noun,” para. 1). Agents working within the Tampa Bay metropolitan area tended to espouse one of two attitudes about urban Extension. Agents either felt Extension in urban areas was the same as Extension anywhere else, or agents believed in the uniqueness of urban Extension. At times, agents acknowledged some unique differences but believed Extension was the same in spite of those differences.

Agents who believed Extension was the same everywhere discussed similar programming needs across contexts as evidence supporting their viewpoints. Tracy asked, “Is there really a difference?” and explained the program requests received from urban audiences did not differ from those received from rural audiences. Similarities in programming needs were identified for 4-H, health, and wellness. Bill said, “I think most of the programs that Extension has right now can fit very easily into an urban environment with just a little bit of adjustment in the way that we approach the problems we face.” Concern was expressed about differentiating Extension contexts, as indicated when Tracy asked, “When they are pushing this urban versus rural, are we really doing a favor or dissatisfaction to a lot of our programs by separating them?”

In contrast, the uniqueness of urban Extension was articulated by the majority of interviewed agents. That uniqueness was explained in terms of unique context, unique clientele needs, and unique agent expertise. Variation in how the agents viewed each of those subthemes existed.

Context. The urban context was described as unique in several ways. Carla and Betty described the urban context as the “inner city” and “the suburbs” (Betty). High population density was identified as another unique characteristic by multiple agents. In the Tampa Bay area, Pinellas County is particularly unique in that it is “so densely populated and built out, there really is not a demarcation of urban versus rural” anymore (Kristin). Sarah expressed a desire for research and publications geared toward the “urban environment” to address the educational needs of people engaging in agriculture on the limited land available in the highly populated areas. Additionally, Bill noted differences in population density create differences in “environmental needs relative to types of loads and frequencies of pollution events.”

The presence of high numbers of other service providers within the urban context was also mentioned as a unique characteristic, with Kristin describing the Tampa Bay area as “resource-rich.” Bill expressed “a need for social coordination” between service providers. Owen shared, “I think about how we’re not the only game in town—there’s a lot of different partners doing a lot of different things, quite a few with missions quite similar to Extension.” The Boys and Girls Club and the Health Department were identified as examples of providers with similar missions.

Clientele needs. Agents described the uniqueness of clientele needs within the Tampa Bay area. Leila shared a historical perspective, noting the expectation from years ago was to conduct traditionally focused programs but then as times changed, “it was a lot easier to do focus groups and find out where the needs were and be able to develop the programs to target those particular needs. And it was kind of obvious that the needs on the east [rural] side were different from the west [urban] side.”

The differences in clientele needs led Sophia to “tailor” her programs to fit each audience. An example was provided by Heidi, who explained, “For me, its youth programs that are not solely animal-based. So, bringing in projects that interest, and that kids in the city can do.”

Agent expertise. To a lesser extent, the need for unique agent expertise was expressed. The Tampa Bay area already has a regional urban sustainability agent, a unique position within UF/IFAS Extension, as well as an urban forestry agent. Additionally, interest in hiring new agents with expertise in city planning, job creation, business development, and engineering was expressed. Sarah described how the lack of space available to run commercial agricultural operations created a significant need for expertise in landscape maintenance. While heavily urbanized counties might have less of a need for a traditional production agriculture agent, there is an increasing demand for agents with expertise in small-scale farms, the cottage food industry, and backyard poultry.

Program Strategies

Almost every agent interviewed answered the question, “What do you think of when you hear the term ‘urban Extension’ or think of Extension working in a metropolitan area?” Agents were asked to describe aspects of how he or she approached programming, which makes sense given the relationship between attitudes, beliefs, and behavior theorized by Ajzen (2012). Consistent with the philosophical views described by agents, operational program strategies ranged from traditional to highly innovative.

Convenient. The need to make Extension convenient in urban areas was prevalent in the data. Agents in the Tampa Bay area continue to conduct “traditional face-to-face classes” (Cynthia), but some are held away from the Extension office at places like libraries. Mia explained, “We have bricks and mortar, but that’s not necessarily where we offer the programs because when you’re in an urban office, you have to go to the people.” Potential clientele are deterred by the perceived distance to the office from their residence; Erica felt clientele “think we’re all light years away—that it’s far too far for them to drive.” Yet Erica also admitted, “Honestly, I love it when we can teach a class here because I can get 100 people in our conference center and teach them in one hour. If I go to other places in the county, I may have 20 or 30 people and then I also have travel time. So I understand people’s concerns about driving a distance.” Transportation and accessibility barriers were identified, with Betty noting the county office was “not really accessible to a lot of the clientele that is considered an urban audience” due to a lack of convenient public transportation options, such as a bus route. The idea of opening an Extension satellite office in a “heavily urbanized area” (Owen) had been discussed by one county, with the concept that Extension could have “a little store with a lot of information where people could go in and we could be right in the urban area where maybe it’s a Wi-Fi hotspot where people could come in with their coffee” (Owen). Although the concept began as a joke, that office eventually came to see “how it really might make sense” (Owen). Such an idea would integrate traditional face-to-face delivery with an innovative location; a hybrid between old and new strategies.

Partnerships. Providing education to the highly populated Tampa Bay area was described as a challenge by Alexis: “You know we have close to a million people in my county and I’m one person. So it’s like how do we reach, we’re still one person whether we’re reaching 3,000 people or 3 million.” Forming partnerships was a strategy used to address the challenge. Agents referenced working with local contacts such as food banks, churches, and Boys and Girls Clubs. Another agent partnered with a large university in Tampa to host educational films. Working in this manner allows Extension to “leverage their presence and to get more visibility for the value of Extension overall” (Kristin).

Filling the gaps. Related to the idea of developing partnerships was a strategy for Extension agents to fill the gaps rather than compete with other service providers. The idea that Extension should be “establishing themselves as a niche provider of services for which there might be a gap” (Kristin) resonated with multiple participants. Tracy described finding the niche as “tweaking the program for the space that’s available” so as not to overlap with other youth service providers. However, Owen described the tension of working in a pluralistic Extension system, sharing, “People talk about it in terms of almost, as if we’re in competition with [other service providers].” The difficulty of filling the gaps was articulated by Mia: “We are very rich in resources so trying to kind of carve out a niche for Extension and what we offer can be a big challenge in an urban area.”

Urban disconnect. The challenge for Extension to have a clear identity within the urban setting is compounded by the existence of an urban disconnect. Most urban residents lack awareness of Extension as a resource. Alexis expressed the frustration of being able to easily reach the “choir people” (as in “preaching to the choir”) but not being able to attract other residents for whom “the information is relevant and important.” Partly, this was attributed to the tendency for urban populations to obtain “more information from share groups and online sources” (Cynthia), which was noted as a condition impacting Extension’s programming and relevancy.

The extent to which urban populations can be disconnected from Extension was highlighted in an anecdote shared by an agent: “A lot of the people we were talking to and coming into our classes just don’t know what Extension is. I had somebody in a class at a library the other day. I mentioned Extension, but I didn’t give the full elevator speech telling them exactly what it was in that particular case because I had a lot of material to cover. And she came up to me afterwards and said, ‘I always hear of Extension, but I didn’t know what it was and I thought it was some kind of secret society or clique or something like that’” (Bill).

As a result, that agent now always dedicates time to explaining Extension to new clientele as a strategy for combatting the urban disconnect. Ironically, other strategies designed to increase Extension’s visibility in the Tampa Bay area were noted to further confuse urban clientele. Working with partnerships and teaching at off-site locations caused “the whole branding thing [to get] lost” (Mia). Mia felt, “People really just don’t know and can’t get a grasp on Extension.”

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to explore metropolitan Extension agents’ views of the concept of urban Extension. An important question inherent within that purpose was to establish whether agents even believed urban Extension was a unique concept within the broader spectrum of Extension. The majority of agents within the Tampa Bay area identified unique aspects they associated with the concept of urban Extension, supporting the importance of local, state, and national efforts to examine how best to carry out the Extension mission in metropolitan areas.

Concern has sometimes been expressed about differentiating Extension based on geographic location of programming and audiences. Even within this small-scale qualitative study, an agent questioned the appropriateness of an “urban versus rural” approach. Consideration of this concern should focus on the unique aspects identified by the agents, which were context, clientele needs, and agent expertise. None of the agents suggested the *mission* of Extension was—or should be—different in an urban area. There is only one mission for Extension, regardless of where Extension is working.

Acknowledging the viewpoints expressed by the interviewed agents as legitimate is critical—even those viewpoints which are in the minority. The agents in this study worked in counties that were all recognized as part of the Tampa Bay area, but Pinellas County is still different from Hillsborough and Pasco Counties. Pinellas is completely built out, and there is no section of the county which could be considered rural. In contrast, Pasco County is rapidly urbanizing but still retains a rural character on its eastern side. Hillsborough County is similar. As a result, it is possible agents in urbanizing counties experience different social pressures than their colleagues in completely urbanized counties. Further, addressing the challenge of delivering quality programming in two different contexts is likely to impact what an agent perceives as possible. Both of these factors are likely to influence attitudes toward urban Extension and related behaviors (Ajzen, 2012). Strong Extension leadership is needed to guide urbanizing counties in a manner that will provide crucial support to agents, facilitate open dialogue with traditional stakeholders, and lead to the development of new relationships with incoming residents.

Additionally, Extension leadership should carefully consider which behaviors are most likely to lead to the successful application of the Extension mission within urban areas and then work with agents to develop an organizational culture that values those behaviors. UF/IFAS Extension has made significant progress in this regard with the 2015 Strategic Plan for Extension in Metropolitan Areas. The strategic plan notes the need for professional development for “urban competencies.” While the plan does not specifically identify which competencies qualify as “urban,” both the plan and the data from this study emphasize the importance of partnerships and cooperating with other service providers to expand Extension’s reach within the highly populated metropolitan areas. Developing and sustaining partnerships and other behaviors identified as desirable should be backstopped at the administrative level by linking their implementation to appraisal and rewards (Burke & Litwin, 1992) and proactively seeking applicants with experience building partnerships when screening for new hires within the Tampa Bay area.

A note of caution should be inserted when discussing the expansion of partnerships. Several agents addressed actively working with partners to deliver programming, which is certainly an effective strategy for reaching more and/or different audiences. Yet as identified in the findings, becoming a partner can come at the expense of establishing Extension’s unique identity within the pluralistic Extension landscape of a major metropolitan area. Extension has had a persistent

problem branding itself (DeBord, 2007). Some insight into the nature of this problem is offered by this study; Extension has such incredible access to a wide variety of research-based knowledge that this study's agents tended to find ways to fill the gaps rather than to claim an area of expertise and out-compete other service providers. Based on the authors' experience, agent turnover only exacerbates the problem as new agents usually do things differently than their predecessors. As a result, Extension ends up lacking any clear identity, and the majority of the urban population remains disconnected from the organization.

A 2004 case study of marketing UF/IFAS Extension conducted by Alberts, Wirth, Gilmore, Jones, and McWaters (2004) concluded

The public's awareness of IFAS/Extension and their belief that the information found there is the best information they can obtain at the lowest cost is key to Extension's success in the future...The threat to IFAS/Extension comes in its inability to identify those programs that are key to its success and retaining the proper staff to promote those programs. IFAS/Extension also needs to be aware of those areas where the private sector or other organizations are duplicating their efforts. ("IFAS/Extension's Current Situation," para. 4)

It is striking how much of what Alberts et al. (2004) wrote remains relevant more than a decade later and accurately outlines the experiences shared by the agents in this study. The lack of awareness within the urban population, the cost to clientele in terms of a lack of convenient options for accessing information, and potential duplication of efforts were all identified as challenges for agents working within the Tampa Bay area, yet an argument can easily be made that overcoming a legacy as the *best kept secret* is a challenge for Extension nationwide. Alberts et al.'s (2004) suggestion to identify programs that are "key to its success" ("IFAS/Extension's Current Situation," para. 4) and to make staffing decisions accordingly bears repeating as it resonates as a viable and necessary approach for improving Extension's visibility; however, restricting agents' freedom to build their own programs is counter to what many Extension agents see as attractive about Extension careers (Arnold & Place, 2010). Extension organizations seeking to increase their visibility within urbanized areas could most practically implement Alberts et al.'s (2004) solution by aligning open positions with key programs (not simply broad program areas) rather than mandating existing agents to adopt state-promoted programs.

Although this study focused on one metropolitan area, the themes and subthemes identified add to the national conversation about urban Extension by providing a snapshot of the views of a cross-section of Extension agents. This cross-section included agents who were enthusiastic about urban Extension—several Tampa Bay agents served on the committee that developed the urban Extension strategic plan—as well as those who were more conservative in their views.

Most metropolitan areas are likely to be staffed with individuals who fall along similar spectrums; making a concerted effort to hear all voices will lead to better outcomes for agents and the organization. Other state Extension systems are encouraged to conduct similar studies with their metropolitan-area agents as they craft their own plans for moving urban Extension forward.

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