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Foreword

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Foreword

The last few years have been filled with social, economic, and environmental change as well as upheaval, unrest, and a global pandemic. It seems like all are at unprecedented levels not experienced by the last several generations. We are being challenged to face and address the current and historical impacts of racism in America. We are coming to the widespread realization that climate change is real and is impacting the lives of millions. We are seeing people doubt long-held democratic views and norms and question science. Are we seeing the fabric of the United States torn beyond repair, as some might suggest, or a door open to a new era? Indeed, the United States and the world are on the precipice.

In 2014, as the Cooperative Extension Service was celebrating its centennial anniversary, it too faced its own precipice. Would it and could it continue to be a successful driver of personal and community change for the good of America? During the 20th century, Extension and its parent Land-Grant Universities (LGUs) helped drive a revolution in agricultural production, freeing up the necessary workforce to fuel the Industrial Revolution. LGUs trained many of the engineers and applied scientists that developed the innovations necessary to drive the industrialization of the nation.

In the century since Extension was created, not only has the economy of the United States changed, so have the predominant communities and faces of the people who live in these communities. U.S. Census data show that in 1914, 54.4% of the United States population lived in rural communities, and 45.6% lived in urban areas. As of the 2020 U.S. Census, 86% of the United States population lived in metropolitan areas. The United States has also become more diverse. U.S. Census projects indicate the United States will continue this trajectory through much of the current century.

Extension's viability and success hinge on its ability to respond and adapt to the changing demographics of the nation. Extension will be required to recognize and draw on the assets it has developed during its first century to continue to have societal value. Extension will also need to recognize the deficits or liabilities the system has in meeting the unique aspects of urban communities and residents, then develop strategies to overcome them. To achieve this, Extension will need to amplify the unheard voices of the many disenfranchised living in the heart of our cities and play a crucial role in bridging our nation's urban/rural divide.

As the national Extension system began its centennial celebration, a small group of Extension professionals who were passionate about working in urban communities came together with the goal of elevating the awareness, conversation, and appreciation for the outstanding Extension work being done in cities across the country. As that spirited group of grassroots leaders embarked upon those initial goals, it was with a shared understanding of why it was both the right thing to do along with a reorganization of how the work aligned with Extension's mission

and values. They also acknowledge that for the long-term viability and success of Extension, working in urban communities with diverse populations and telling the story about that work effectively was also the strategic thing for Extension to do. This was the beginning of the National Urban Extension Leaders (NUEL).

By the end of 2015, NUEL had become a working group of the national Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) focused on advancing the strategic importance and long-term value of urban Extension activities by being relevant locally, responsive statewide, and recognized nationally. To reinvigorate a national discussion and move toward a more sustainable and integrated approach to urban Extension, NUEL penned [*The National Framework for Urban Extension*](#). The framework laid out a “Call to Action” of the national Extension system. In early 2019, ECOP approved a [*National Urban Extension Initiative: Implementation Plan*](#) developed by NUEL to address the six areas identified in the framework that Extension needed to focus on to improve and expand its efforts in urban communities. The six areas or goals are to:

- Create a substantial Extension presence in cities and metropolitan areas and ensure a viable future by responding to the demographic trend of urbanization.
- Create a wide range of partnerships and collaborations at a multitude of levels with organizations where roles are distinct, yet missions are aligned, where visibility, credit, and resources are shared.
- Develop programming and other urban Extension initiatives that are transdisciplinary in nature, meet the needs of urban residents, and address the issues of urban communities.
- Create authentic professional development activities to address the needs of Extension personnel in urban areas.
- Examine how current funding structures are utilized and how existing funding lines can be transformed or created from idea generation, dialogue, and fresh innovations to ensure they are more inclusive and complimentary.
- Empower urban advocates internally, within such groups as ECOP, USDA-NIFA, and National Extension Directors Association, and externally that support NUEL’s acknowledged purpose of advancing the strategic importance and long-term value of urban Extension activities by being relevant locally, responsive statewide, and recognized nationally.

Since 2019, NUEL, ECOP, and hundreds of Extension professionals working in urban communities across the country have been working and participating in activities that have made progress toward achieving one or more of these goals. As the chair and vice-chair of the NUEL, we are excited to have the *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension* contribute to this work by publishing this special issue focused on Extension’s engagement in urban communities. This special issue of the *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension* contains a comprehensive series of articles from experts who have synthesized the diverse work and future opportunities for

Extension as it continues to address the needs and issues of urban communities and residents. We hope that these articles will guide and inform Extension's efforts to respond and adapt to the nation's changing demographics.

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Resources

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