COUNTY EXTENSION IN TEXAS

An Analysis of Operations and Recommendations for Influencing Outcomes

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between November 2020 and January 2021, the Sustainable Food Center (SFC), in collaboration with the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service, conducted a series of interviews with agriculture extension agents from around the country. The goals of the project were: to better understand how extension operates; assess how they determine county-level focus areas; and to enumerate ways that the Travis County Agricultural Extension Office can commit more attention and resources to food gardening education, food access, and regenerative agriculture.

A graduate student researcher from the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas, Austin interviewed representatives from 11 county extension agencies located throughout the country, and compiled the results into this report. The results showed that extension agencies in other parts of the country were more likely to: use a broader, food systems lens in their educational materials and organizational outlook, and have a better sense of the needs of their community through closer contact with community stakeholders and policymakers at the city, county, and state levels.

Section 1 is an introduction to the project and to the stakeholder organizations. Section 2 provides background information on the history of extension in the United States, and on the current state of cooperative extension in Texas. Section 3 details the methodology used to create and conduct the interviews. Section 4 provides the results of the interviews, divided into sections for programmatic questions, operational questions, and the differences between how extension operates in Texas versus the rest of the nation. Section 5 offers recommendations for actions that Travis County Extension can take to promote more sustainable agricultural activity and a more inclusive decision-making structure.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1

- Encourage immediate review of various training curricula offered by extension, utilizing participatory evaluation methods to ensure inclusion and promotion of sustainability-focused methods
  - Particular attention should be paid to trainings offered as a part of 4-H and Master Gardener programs

2

- Emphasize the importance of holistic systems thinking in all aspects of extension programming

3

- Foster more robust outreach programs, regarding both marketing for extension programming and stakeholder outreach to seek iterative improvement based on community input

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1: *Sustainable Food Center*

The **Sustainable Food Center** (SFC) is an Austin, Texas-based organization that seeks to "cultivate a just and regenerative food system so people and the environment can thrive."[1] SFC was founded in 1993, and for nearly three decades has worked towards the goal of a more equitable, resilient, and local food system in Central Texas. In 2018, SFC announced a refreshed vision for their organization. The project, dubbed "Regenerate Our Land, Reform Our Food," created a new set of goals, mission, and values aimed at significantly increasing the amount of local, sustainable food in Central Texas by 2035.[2] The first stage of this process, fact-finding and research, is currently underway.

1.2: *RKG Center for Philanthropy and Community Service*

This report is the result of a collaborative research project between SFC and the University of Texas at Austin's **RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service**, housed at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. The RGK Center provides resources and support to Central Texas organizations seeking to utilize data analysis techniques to streamline existing processes, conduct needs assessments, and/or roll out new initiatives. Through the CONNECT Program, nonprofit organizations apply for assistance, and are assigned graduate researchers from the University of Texas to work on their projects over the course of a semester.

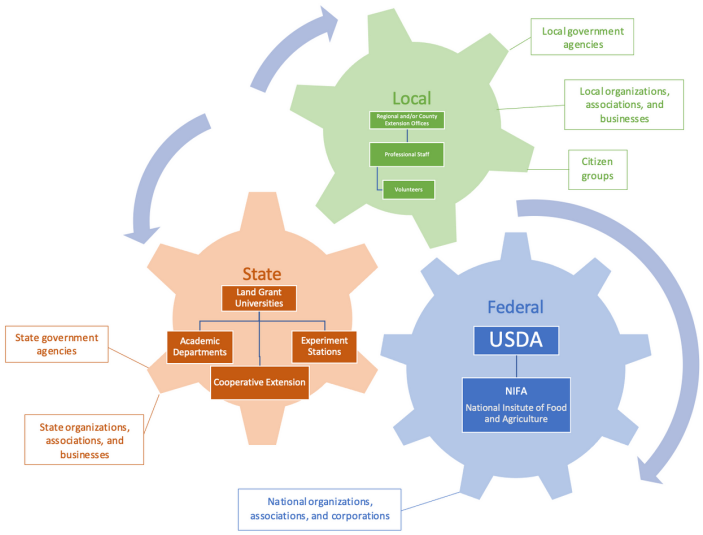
1.3: *Project Description*

This project seeks to gather information about the operations and programmatic focus areas in agriculture extension services in Central Texas, around the rest of the state, and in urban counties throughout the country. The CONNECT Program graduate researcher conducted interviews with county extension agents. This report presents the results of those interviews, along with recommendations for ways that Central Texas county extension agencies can commit more attention and resources to food gardening education, food access, and regenerative agriculture.

SECTION 2: BACKGROUND

2.1: *Cooperative Agricultural Extension*

Figure 1: Illustration of the different interrelated levels of cooperative extension in the US



Source: USDA National Institute of Food and Agricultural Systems[4]

In 1914, Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act, formalizing the longstanding unofficial system in which farmers shared best practices. Cooperative Extension is the outreach and education arm for public land-grant universities throughout the United States. Today, there are almost 3,000 extension agencies located in county or regional hubs throughout the country.[3] They help coordinate programs; provide regional-specific resources; and act as a central hub between farmers, county government agriculture and food access agencies, and university research apparatuses.

In 2005, the United States Department of Agriculture launched eXtension, an online message board and resource center where subject matter experts from extension agencies can connect and share experiences and support with stakeholders and farmers.

Funding allocation is understandably region-specific. A 2014 USDA study found that in 2010 on average 24% of all full-time extension employees (FTEs) in the US were dedicated to sustainable agriculture. This reflected a range from 18% in the Lake States and the Corn Belt, to 38% in the Pacific region. The Southern Plains region, encompassing Texas and Oklahoma, was near the national average, with 23% of their FTEs working in sustainable agriculture.

Figure 2: Breakdown of Extension Full-Time Employees (FTEs) by Subject Area, 2010
Source: Choices: A Publication of the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association[5]

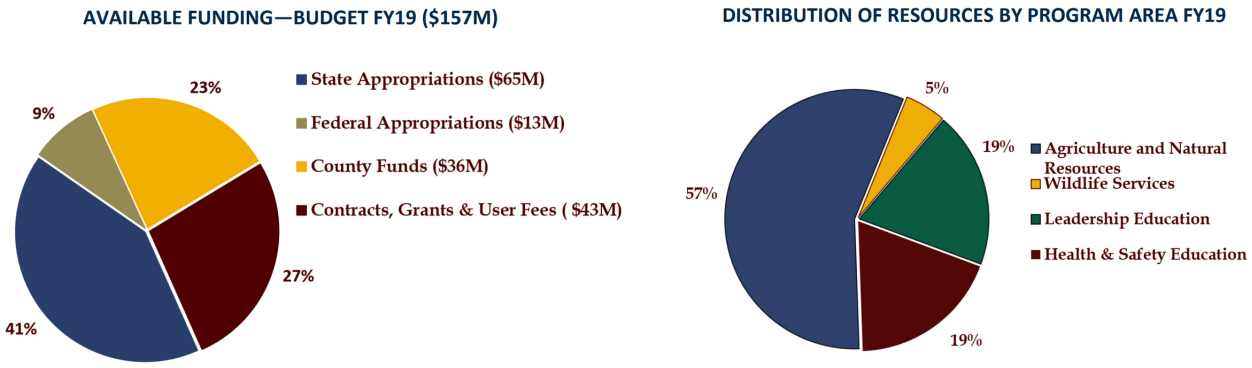
Production Regions	Extension FTE work plan (percentage)						
	Environmental Systems	Family and Consumer Sciences	Food Safety & Food Sciences	Human Nutrition	Sustainable Agricultural Systems	Youth Development	Other
Northeast	14%	24%	7%	21%	19%	12%	2%
Lake States	12%	37%	5%	9%	18%	18%	2%
Corn Belt	6%	32%	4%	13%	18%	26%	1%
Northern Plains	12%	21%	13%	17%	25%	10%	2%
Appalachian	6%	26%	4%	18%	28%	16%	1%
Southeast	16%	23%	4%	9%	29%	18%	2%
Delta	10%	22%	2%	12%	27%	26%	1%
Southern Plains	11%	26%	1%	12%	23%	26%	1%
Mountain	13%	27%	3%	15%	26%	16%	1%
Pacific	24%	12%	3%	7%	38%	14%	2%
48 states total	12%	25%	5%	15%	24%	17%	1%

Note: Farm production regions: Northeast includes NH, PA, ME, MD, RI, MA, DE, CT, VT, MA, NJ; Lake States includes MN, MI, WI; Corn Belt includes OH, IA, MO, IN, IL; Appalachian includes WV, TN, NC, VA, KY; Southeast includes SC, AL, GA, FL; Delta includes LA, AR, MS; Northern Plains includes ND, SD, KS, NE; Southern Plains includes TX, OK; Mountain includes CO, UT, AZ, NM, WY, NV, ID, MT; and Pacific includes OR, CA, WA. Other plans of work include programs in the following areas--Bioenergy, Climate Change, Education/Multicultural Alliances, International Programs, and Youth Development.

2.2: *Extension Funding Model*

Cooperative extension is funded by a combination of federal, state, and local funds, along with outside grants, contracts, and user fees (see Figure 3 for a more detailed breakdown of the budget and resource allocation for FY2019). Over the past several decades, the share of funding from the federal government has fallen dramatically, declining from 42% in 1972, to 24% in 2000, to 9% today,[6] in part reflecting larger trends within the USDA of lower public spending on research over the last two decades.[7]

Figure 3: Texas AgriLife Budget and Resource Allocation, FY2019

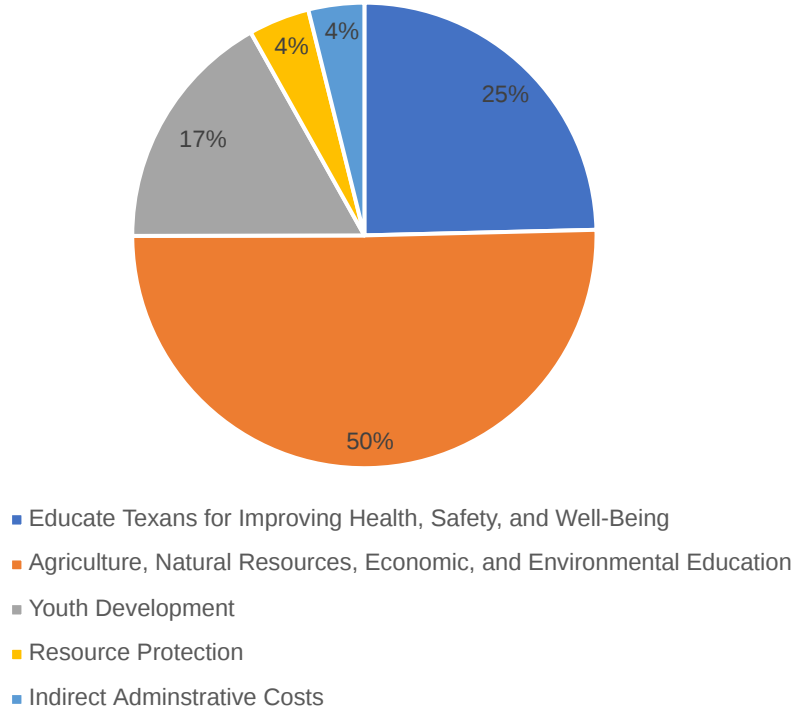


Source: Texas A&M AgriLife Extension[8]

Federal funding for extension is described in Title VII of the 2018 Farm Bill. About two-thirds of federal dollars are allocated through formula funding: 20% is divided evenly to each state; 40% is based upon each state's relative level of rural population; and 40% is based upon each state's relative level of farming population.

The remainder of extension funding comes from state and local investments. Texas AgriLife Extension requested just over $75 million from the state legislature for FY 2022 and 2023.[9] This is broken down by proportion requested for each of their main strategies in Figure 4:

Figure 4: Texas AgriLife Proposed State Budget by Strategy Area, FY2022/2023



Source: Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Legislative Appropriations Request; graphic created by author[10]

2.3: *Extension in Texas*

The primary extension hub in Texas is based in the Texas A&M AgriLife system, although 35 counties are also served by an extension program based at Prairie View A&M. Founded in 1915, just one year after the passage of the Smith-Lever Act, AgriLife operates agencies in 250 Texas counties, and is the largest extension service in the country.[11] The agencies offer support in a wide variety of food and agriculture-related program areas, although some counties offer more than others. Some notable examples found in all counties in Texas are:

- Better Living for Texans (BLT)
  - Nutrition and physical activity education support for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients
- Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP)
  - Nationally-funded program providing food and nutrition education to limited-resource families and youth
- Master Gardener Program
  - Volunteer educational program that teaches participants horticultural techniques that they can, in turn, convey to their own communities
- 4-H and Youth Development
  - The largest single aspect of extension, 4-H focuses on educating Texas's youth on matters of horticulture, gardening, STEM, and leadership

2.4: *Extension in Travis County*

Around Austin, each of the counties that make up the Capital region have their own extension agency. The Travis County Extension Agency[12] is located in Austin, and employs about a dozen agents and support staff, and a large number of volunteers, to serve the entire county. The agency's mission, stated on its website, is "*to improve the lives of people, businesses, and communities through providing high quality, relevant outreach and continuing education programs and services to the residents of Travis County.*"[13] Travis County Extension particularly emphasizes support for the following core topic areas:

Agriculture and Natural Resources
The Agriculture and Natural Resources topic area focuses on enhancing profitability through the use of sound crop and animal usage, as informed by the AgriLife extension research hub at Texas A&M University. They conduct events and trainings with farmers living in Travis County, and focus on conveying best practices as defined by a combination of research, experience, and community input.

2.4: *Extension in Travis County, cont'd*

[4-H and Youth Development]
Travis County 4-H is open to any child residing in the county when they reach 9 years of age, or are 8 and have begun the third grade. They offer 18 clubs for the children to join, covering different geographic and topic areas.

[Horticulture]
The Horticulture team is responsible for all aspects of gardening education that the Travis County Extension Office covers. Most notably, this includes overseeing the Master Gardener program, which recruits volunteers into a 50-hour training course.

[Integrated Pest Management]
Integrated Pest Management provides information and support for managing pest concerns for families, communities, schools, farms, and ranches.

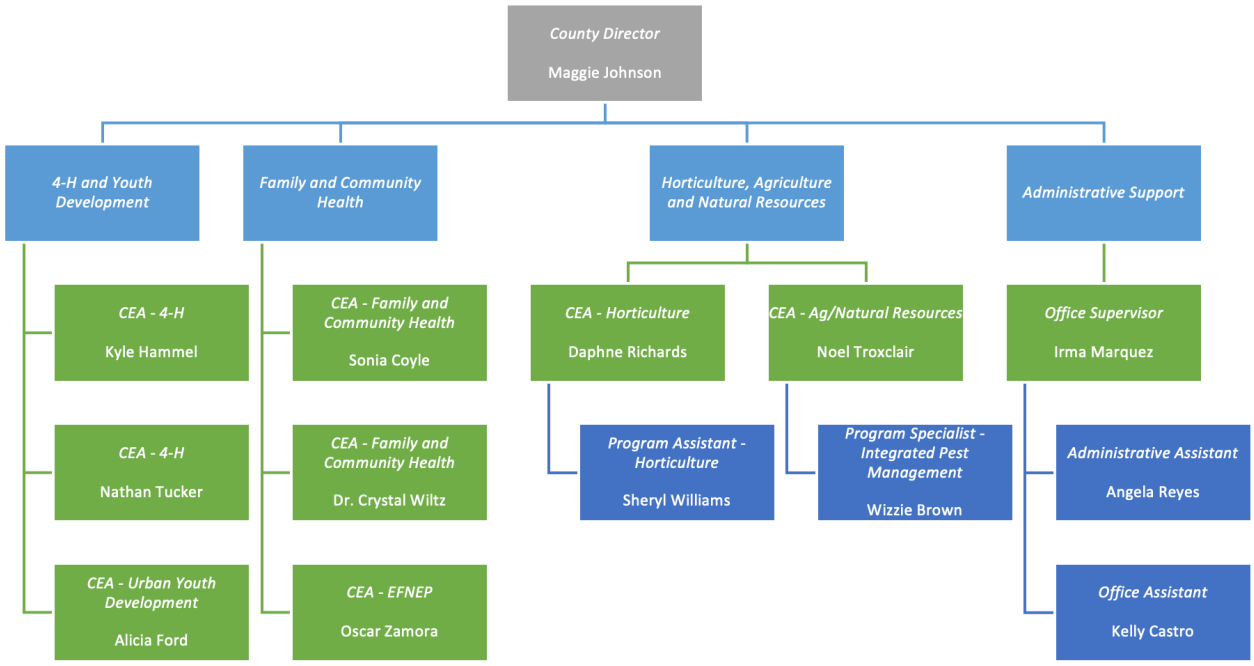
[Family and Community Health]
The Family and Community Health team focuses on educating around food safety and nutrition issues with a community-level perspective, working closely with the 4-H team regarding children's issues and with the Horticulture team on issues of healthy gardening techniques.

[Nutrition, Health, and Wellness]
This team is focused more on micro, family-level nutrition concerns, providing classes on how to eat well and live healthier lives.

A 2012 report published by AgriLife found that, during the previous year, Travis County Extension had conducted more than 6,600 educational programs and reached more than 200,000 individuals in the county.[14] Figure 4 is the most recent organizational chart, showing the county extension director and the different programs she oversees.

2.4: *Extension in Travis County, cont'd*

Figure 4: Organizational Chart, Travis County Extension Agency



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Source: Travis County Extension Website, graphic created by author

SECTION 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1: *Identifying Interview Subjects*

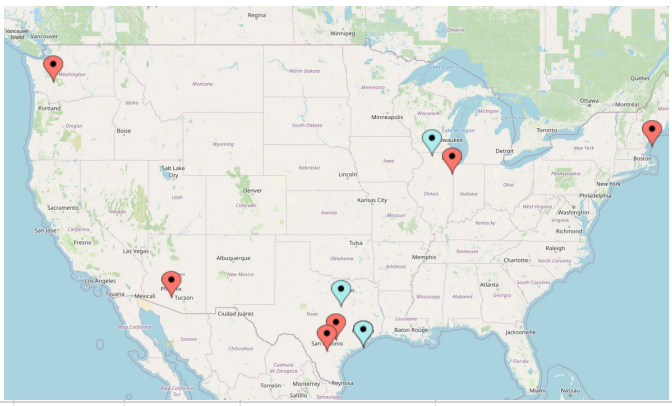
The first step in this project was to identify particular interviewees from whom we could gain the most pertinent and actionable information. We utilized a combination of contacts through SFC networks, personal research, and suggestions from interviewees about other potential contacts with whom to speak. Our primary criteria for determining the fitness of each interviewee were:

1. Their county's geographic similarity to Travis County
2. Their county's agricultural similarity to Travis County, as defined through research into productivity and suggestions from interviewees about which areas were most similar to Central Texas
3. Their reputation among other interviewees for having a wide knowledge base and a willingness to share ideas and insights

Each of the interviewees that we contacted satisfied at least one of these criteria. In all, we reached out to 23 people, and conducted interviews with 11, resulting in a 48% response rate. Of those 11 interviews, 6 were with Texas extension agents, and 5 were from agencies in urban counties elsewhere in the country.

3.1: *Identifying Interview Subjects, cont'd*

Figure 5: List with location and titles and Map of Extension Interviewees; red markers denote a single interview, blue markers denote multiple interviews



State	County	City	Name	Title
AZ	Maricopa	Phoenix	Ed Martin	County Director
IL	Cook	Chicago	Zachary Grant	CEA - Local Food Systems
ME	Cumberland	Portland	Jason Lilley	CEA - Sustainable Agriculture
TX	Bexar	San Antonio	David Rodriguez	CEA - Horticulture
TX	Tarrant	Fort Worth	Courtney Davis	County Director
TX	Tarrant	Fort Worth	Laura Miller	CEA - Horticulture
TX	Harris	Houston	Shannon Dietz	CEA - Agriculture/Natural Resources
TX	Harris	Houston	David Wright	County Director
TX	Travis	Austin	Maggie Johnson	County Director
WI	Dane	Madison	Diane Mayerfield	CEA - Agriculture/Natural Resources
WI	Dane	Madison	Jessica Guffey Calkins	CEA - Local Food Systems
WA	Whitman	Pullman	Marcia Ostrom	Faculty Advisor

Source: Created by author

3.2: *Interview Description*

Each interview took place either over the phone or via teleconference between November 2020 and January 2021. The average length of each interview was 30 minutes per call. Generally, we tried to focus on speaking with people with broad organizational and institutional knowledge; therefore, we emphasized county directors, agents with long tenures, and those identified by other interviewees as being central to overall extension success.

3.3: *Interview Questions*

The interview was divided into two main topic areas: programmatic questions and operational questions. The primary goal of the first area was to better understand programs offered by extension agencies, and therefore to better grasp their impact on the communities they serve. The second topic area questions were designed to get a holistic understanding of how each agency determined priorities, funded their programs, and interacted with outside organizations like SFC.

3.3: *Interview Questions, cont'd*

Below is a list of the questions asked to each interviewee:

PROGRAMMATIC QUESTIONS

- What support does your office/organization offer for programs relating to:
  - Regenerative/organic/sustainable agriculture?
  - Organic food gardening education?
  - Support for community gardening or agriculture?
  - Food access?
  - Efforts to combat food insecurity?
  - Healthy food access initiatives?

OPERATIONAL QUESTIONS

- What kinds of interactions does your office/agency have with nonprofits, NGOs, community groups, advocacy organizations, etc.?
- How does your office/organization determine its project focus and/or priorities?
  - How much autonomy do you have at the county level to establish priorities?
  - What role do elected officials or the state Department of Agriculture play?
- How do you feel your office/organization compares with analogous offices/organizations?
  - Other urban counties?

SECTION 4: RESULTS

4.1: *Interview Results - Programmatic Questions*

Programmatically, extension is relatively homogeneous across the various organizations that we interviewed in this study. All of the organizations emphasized their work as educators, primarily through the Master Gardener program offered at every extension branch. Essentially, this program is a training course for volunteers, at the end of which an official Cooperative Extension Master Gardener certification is awarded. Master Gardeners seem to be the primary way that extension agencies conduct outreach into their communities, sending their members into schools, city governments, and adult education programs to spread their expertise. There was little emphasis on discussing recruitment and marketing methods for this program, as it seemed to rely fairly heavily on volunteers seeking it out for themselves.

4.1 *Interview Results - Programmatic Questions, cont'd*

In general, the extension agencies surveyed did not emphasize regenerative agriculture as the best course, instead preferring to speak about "best practices" for each geographic and agricultural context. There appeared to be some unease about using terminology like "regenerative" or "sustainable", so as to remain politically neutral to their clientele. One agent defended the exclusion of these words by saying "adherence to dogma is not helping" their cause. Most agents seemed overly wary of tying their work too closely to environmentalism, instead preferring to ground their work in gardening, self-sufficiency, nutrition, and community empowerment. There were exceptions to this rule however: most notably, the agents interviewed in Cumberland County, Maine (Portland) and Dane County, Wisconsin (Madison) talked at great length about their dedication to regenerative agriculture. They both particularly emphasized the role of the city government in supporting their efforts to expand sustainable agricultural practices.

Programmatic support for efforts to combat food insecurity was more heterogeneous, varying greatly between agency contexts. Multiple agencies discussed their work supporting community farmers' markets, and particularly the use of SNAP and WIC to help subsidize the costs to low-income consumers. Some operate their own gardens or small farms where part of the produce is donated to food banks or similar organizations. The Better Living for Texans (BLT) program is an extension effort to provide nutrition education for SNAP-eligible Texans.[16] Notably, the representatives from Travis and Harris Counties both acknowledged a relative lack of support for food access programs.

4.2: *Interview Results - Operational Questions*

Some of the most interesting results came from the questions pertaining to extension's operational and organizational activities. Most of the interviewees spoke about extension's position at the intersection of: the research and academic work happening at their sponsor university; the policy of their particular state and local governments; and the input they solicit from the community members they help to serve. Overwhelmingly, respondents cited community feedback as the most important input into their decision-making processes. Almost all extension offices had some mechanism for seeking commentary from stakeholders within their counties, the most common of which was the use of regularly-scheduled needs assessments. They convene community leaders and advocates at regular intervals to better understand how they can tailor their program focus areas to the needs of their intended recipients. In Texas, the AgriLife extension program hosts a biennial conference called Texas Speaks (formerly the Texas Community Futures Forum)[17] to determine the overall direction of Texas extension services. Each individual county has their own version as well, and many counties conduct more frequent assessments for specific topic areas.

4.2 Interview Results - Operational Questions, cont'd

For the most part, questions around funding tracked closely with the official breakdown published by the central AgriLife office (see Figure 3). Federal and state appropriations were reported to be the most directly earmarked, as the different levels of government were more likely to prescribe activities that they thought advantageous. Programs like EFNEP and 4-H mostly fell into this category; their existence is predicated upon carrying out government-mandated priorities. Sources for agent salaries are slightly more varied. In Travis County, they are funded via a 70-30 split: A&M AgriLife funds 70%, and the rest comes from the county and city government. Some interviewees also cited outside funding as a smaller, but still important source for them, particularly when partnering with outside organizations to apply for grants or conduct events and programs.

Importantly for this report, nearly all of the extension employees surveyed cited outside organizations as important partners in achieving their mission. Interviewees identified resource allocation, shared grant application, and event coordination as areas for which partnerships with nonprofits and other institutions proved to be beneficial. Texas extension agencies seemed particularly keen on the idea of sharing information between extension and organizations with similar missions; one agent from Bexar County told me that they were in constant search for partners that did not overshadow each other, but worked as cooperatively as possible. Several interviewees reported a symbiotic relationship with nonprofit organizations, with extension representatives sitting on outside boards and vice versa.

4.3 Interview Results - Texas vs. Other Geographical Areas

In general, extension within and outside of Texas seemed to operate relatively similarly. There were not very many questions for which the answers differed greatly depending on where the agency was geographically located, with the notable exception of some programmatic variation that can be attributed to varying agricultural context. The same hesitation around using language like “sustainable” or “regenerative”, as discussed in section 4.1, existed nearly uniformly across the country (again, with the exception of the counties mentioned in section 4.1). Those few interviewees who did express their desire to promote environmentally-friendly practices made it clear that it was their personal characterization, but that their roles were to simply pass along the results of the research conducted at their parent institution.

4.3 Interview Results - Texas vs. Other Geographical Areas, cont'd

The primary difference between Texas agencies and those from other states that became clear through the interview process was an implicit understanding of the benefits of more holistic approaches to their work. The Texas agents all spoke about their particular topic areas as siloed from other social issues, and to a large extent from other parts of their own county extension services. This was most obvious when replying to questions about food access and food inequality concerns. Agriculture agents in Texas agencies deflected questions on these topics, preferring to stay within their own lanes. Representatives from other regions were more likely to see the various extension arms as tackling interrelated issues; promoting better agricultural activity to help address hunger and nutrition concerns, so as to help mitigate systemic inequalities, create a healthier population, and ensure long-term agricultural resource viability.

Texas agents were also consistently less likely than agents in other parts of the country to report being consulted or advising policymakers at any level, limiting their potential impact to essentially only the parties that actively sought them out. Several interviewees from outside Texas, most notably in Maine, Washington, and Arizona, reported that they were often in touch with lawmakers and their staffs, so as to provide expert feedback on potential legislative changes to the food systems landscape in their communities.

SECTION 5: RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1: Review and Revamp Training Curricula

Travis County Extension should take steps to review all their training curricula and rework it where necessary to emphasize more sustainable agricultural and horticultural methods. The most popular and consequential programs offered by the agency are 4-H and the Master Gardener program. Each of these curricula should be subject to regular audits, both internally and externally, to ensure fidelity to sustainability at all levels. Travis County Extension should employ a participatory evaluation model to this audit, wherein stakeholders and interested parties both within and outside their organization provide input on how the program is designed, implemented, and iteratively updated. They have already demonstrated a willingness to listen to outside groups about determining high-level focus area priorities; that should extend further into the creation of all their programs, and especially those that are most influential within their target community.

5.2: *Emphasize a Systems Approach to Food Production and Consumption*

As discussed in section 4.3, the most glaring difference between Texas cooperative extension and its counterparts from other parts of the country was the former's hesitation to embrace a systems approach to their work. This approach is perhaps most concisely defined in a 2015 report from the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food):

> A discussion of *food systems* refers to the **web of actors, processes, and interactions** involved in growing, processing, distributing, consuming, and disposing of foods, from the provision of inputs and farmer training, to product packaging and marketing, to waste recycling. A holistic food systems lens is concerned with how these processes interact with one another, and with the environmental, social, political, and economic context.[18]

While cooperative extension in Texas is currently only concerned with part of this web, it is crucial that they internalize and broadcast these ideas to their audience. Doing so would reflect a willingness to (a) be receptive to new ideas; (b) develop a more nuanced understanding of the impacts that their programs may have on the larger food system; and (c) aid in creating new programs that are more likely to promote sustainability, equity, and justice.

5.3: *Engage in Broader Outreach Efforts*

Travis County Extension should be more focused on expanding their efforts beyond the subset of farmers and volunteers that actively seek out their training. This could take multiple forms, some of which may be:

- Actively seeking partnerships with nonprofit organizations in and around Travis County for resource sharing, programmatic coordination, and fostering greater community buy-in.
- Creating relationships with policymakers at the city, county, and state level to advocate for better, more sustainability-focused agricultural and food policy. As cited in section 4.3, legislative interaction was one of the areas in which Texas extension lagged behind agencies in other states.
- Conducting outreach to community members via a greater online presence. Expanding their footprint on social media can help expand their potential user base, both for sourcing volunteers and for soliciting feedback on potential programmatic changes.

Travis County Extension should not be passive in their outreach efforts, but instead take more initiative in the search for more and more diverse sources of feedback.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is the result of a collaborative effort between SFC representatives and various contributors associated with the University of Texas at Austin. Mia Burger and Joy Casnovsky at SFC played an important role in overseeing the project and providing important context about their organization's mission and goals. Alyssa Studer and R. Patrick Bixler from the CONNECT Fellowship at the RGK Center were key in forming the initial project plan, and provided important counsel throughout the process.

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