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University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension Fall Conference

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University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension Fall Conference
Grand Island
October 14, 2003
John C. Owens
NU Vice President and IANR Harlan Vice Chancellor

I think Cooperative Extension is "the best" out-of-classroom learning experience ever yet devised anywhere in the world.

I say that every chance I get to the various audiences I address throughout the year, and I say it to you today: The work you do, the way you do it, the expertise and passion you bring to it, the "belief" you have in it, and the commitment you make to it "makes" Cooperative Extension the ~~absolutely best~~ out-of-classroom learning experience available to Nebraskans today. I thank you, each of you, for making that true.

At times, I encounter people who "question" the relevancy of extension in today's world because their personal ideas of extension-education seem to have moved no further than the wonderful old Norman Rockwell painting of an extension agent examining a child's calf while the whole family looks on. When that happens, I

“launch” my own extension educational campaign! I tell them that “while” the dedication and importance of the work done by that county agent whom Rockwell painted is “mirrored” in the dedication and importance of the work done by extension personnel today, the areas in which extension works “today” and the tools it uses “today” to deliver education have changed dramatically since Rockwell created his painting back in 1948. Web pages, video streaming, satellite downlinks, and more are “part” of extension’s delivery repertoire to provide education pertinent to a large number of current issues.

I tell them I am proud – extremely proud – of the heritage “exemplified” in that Rockwell painting, because it is a heritage of providing practical knowledge people-can-put-to-use in their lives. I am proud of the caring and commitment that the Rockwell image captures. I am especially proud that “that” caring and ^{“that”} commitment continue today in the many diverse areas of educational programming in which extension personnel “continue to meet” the critical concerns of today’s constituents.

“Yes,” I tell questioners, we still work with cows and kids and corn – and good for us. We should be “proud” of that. It is wonderful work we have done, and it is wonderful work we continue to do in these areas. But beyond cows and kids and corn, “today” we have programming ranging from global positioning systems, to meeting the technological needs of small towns, to helping families deal with divorce. Good for us for that work, also. We’re helping producers learn about and explore the possibilities of alternative crops, niche markets, and so much more. We’re working with entrepreneurs “intent” on starting their own businesses. We’re “helping people” move from welfare to work, develop better parenting skills, eat more nutritiously, lead more effectively – the list of what Cooperative Extension contributes to Nebraska today is long, and it’s a list of which “everyone” in this room should be extremely proud.

I have said before, and I remain firmly convinced, that land-grant universities that are out of touch with their constituents are land-grant universities headed toward a meaningless existence. It is a land-grant university’s mission to take the resources of the

university to the citizens of the state, and you, as cooperative extension practitioners, are on the front-lines of that work. We depend on you to be in touch with our clientele, as we all must be. We rely on you to listen to your constituents' and your communities' needs and concerns and to relay those needs and concerns to us throughout the Institute and the university so we can listen and respond accordingly.

I know when I visit a county extension office I expect the extension personnel present there can tell me about the essence of their community. Who lives there? What's the tax base? What's the chief economic driver? What are the greatest concerns? What extension-education programs are helping meet those concerns? Who are the new audiences? What are the current issues? What are the issues likely to be three years from now? How will we help meet these needs, and who will we partner with to do so? What do you need from the rest of the Institute team, on campus and throughout our state, to best accomplish that successfully? How can we all work together for Nebraska?

We look to extension personnel throughout Nebraska, on campus and off, to be constantly scanning the horizon for Nebraska's and Nebraskans' future needs, so that research can begin today to answer the questions of tomorrow. We rely on you to help us identify those new audiences we must work with if we are truly to carry out our land-grant university mission.

When people ask me what I think the future of cooperative extension is – and I do get asked that question – I reply that I think extension's future is as exciting as it is challenging. The future is bright, if we continue to offer the solid, valuable educational programming we currently see occurring across our state; if we continue to meet the critical needs of the people of Nebraska and to identify the issues of the future so we can be prepared for them as they arise; and if – and this is an especially important if – we, each of us, continually do our part to tell the story of extension-education, to make clear the benefits we bring our state, and to see that our stakeholders are aware of those benefits and how they apply in their lives. One thing we cannot afford to do is hide our light under a

basket. The work you do shines. And it shines "brightly". It is important work, valuable work, and a key part of the job is making sure the value of that work is documented "effectively and efficiently" so our stakeholders know it and see the value of "what" we do for them.

That is absolutely vital, always, and in days of tight economic budgets, such as the days we've faced in the past two years, and, the days we are concerned we might continue to face, it grows "even more" important.

I understand that when Wendy Wustenberg did two training sessions for extension in the past few years she advised "each" of you to have a 30 or 60 second message about extension that you can deliver at every opportunity possible. "Hi, I'm John Owens, and today I'd like to tell you about what Cooperative Extension is doing to enhance the lives or/economic conditions or/safety of Nebraska through"

That's a good message. I hope "each" of you has one or several that you deliver at every opportunity possible to all appropriate people, ranging from your staunchest supporters to a new legislator

or county official whom you just met.

If you are one of those people who isn't comfortable blowing your own horn, who always felt you couldn't sell tickets to the junior class play even when you were the star, I would say to you this isn't a matter of blowing your own horn – this is a matter of education, and education is our business. This is a matter of making benefits known so people can make "wise choices" as they decide the areas in which they want to see their tax dollars work. This is a matter of making known the excellent educational programming we have available so people who can benefit from that programming are aware of the ways in which our work can enhance their lives, whether economically, professionally, personally, or as a family member. That matters. That matters a lot.

In the future, as in the present, we know extension will focus on issues "critical" to Nebraska. In doing that we want to be sure we are among those who are "building bridges" between the rural and urban parts of our state, not "pitting one against the other. I think our Cooperative Extension Division is particularly "well-suited" to do this

because Cooperative Extension is, in my mind, a "tremendous" bridge-builder.

Extension has a heritage of bridging knowledge from research so it can be delivered to people in understandable, effective ways they can put to use in their lives. Extension has experience in building bridges between people and organizations to get what needs to be done, done. Everybody working in extension today has the job of building bridges of understanding between Nebraska and its land-grant university. All this bridge building is work long done by Cooperative Extension, and done extremely well. So I look to extension to help build the bridge that makes us "one Nebraska," a state of rural and urban areas, NOT a state of rural OR urban areas. The two must work together for the good of all of Nebraska, and we can help lead the way.

In the listening sessions Associate Vice Chancellor Alan Baquet led this year as we prepare to update and enhance the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources strategic plan, we heard some common concerns expressed across the state, regardless of where

people live. Water is one of those concerns; people are concerned about the quantity and quality of Nebraska's water, and they want to preserve it.

Community is another. People in both rural and urban areas have concerns for their communities and for a sense of community. Rural economic opportunities are "vital concerns" for people seeking to preserve communities in the rural parts of our state, and I cannot help but believe that everyone in this room today realizes the importance rural economic opportunities bring to the entire state's economy. The tide that raises one boat raises all.

Extension, because of its heritage of working with many different people and different groups to provide education and help communities move toward a common goal, is in a wonderful position to put the collective collaborative skills of highly trained, hard-working, and committed people to work. We can do so, engaged with and attuned to our constituents so our agenda is in accord with theirs. We can do so as "responsive-members" of a team, respectful of our partners as we work with them to provide the

education needed to meet "the concerns" of our state.

As I look at the issues facing Nebraska today and in the future, I assure you, teamwork is needed. Leadership is needed. Education is needed. Cooperative Extension is needed. As much as ever. Perhaps "even more" than ever. The world is growing increasingly complex. To deal with complex issues requires just what extension has identified as the attributes of tomorrow's successful extension faculty – and in this case, I would tell you I think tomorrow begins today!

When we talk about those attributes, we are talking about people who are successful teachers, capable of planning, designing, implementing, and evaluating extension education programs. People who are subject-matter competent, skilled in communicating, leaders able to work with a variety of individuals. Leaders who can influence people, as well as circumstances, in order to reach "common goals."

We are talking about strong collaborators adept at creating educational partnerships in response to critical issues; people who

are inclusive and who are committed to all members of the community. We are talking about people who are entrepreneurial, aware of the importance of generating grants, contracts, and fees to enhance programming. I am extremely proud, as I know Dean Dickey is, of the tremendous job extension personnel have done garnering grant dollars to bolster programming in the past year. I applaud each of you who is part of that for your success that so greatly benefits Nebraska.

And lastly, as we talk about what will make someone successful in extension tomorrow we are, without a doubt, talking about people who can accept change and deal with ambiguity. The fact that successful extension personnel also may find themselves to become catalysts for change is not, I am sure, a surprise to anyone in this room! Certainly we must be adept at helping people deal with change, for the importance of that life skill is continually emphasized in today's world, where the pace of change is continually escalating.

When I am asked to predict the future of University of Nebraska

Cooperative Extension 10 years from now, I must immediately
“disclaim” that I have no crystal ball that provides me a better insight
than anyone else in this room. But I do on occasion look down the
years and try to envision what all parts of the Institute will be in the
future. When I look 10 years into the future for extension, I expect
that we will “retain” the key elements important to us today. We will
be focusing on issues of importance to Nebraska and Nebraskans;
we will be working with our constituents to define critical issues for
which education is needed, and we will be local, the university's
“front door,” a concept I hope is even more readily embraced by
Nebraskans as the years pass. This university cannot afford to lose its
local connections and its roots.

I think we will see more university-wide collaboration, with
collaborations and partnerships built with various colleges and
campuses within the university. I think we will be constantly
strengthening our 4-H programs, and I devoutly hope that 10 years
from now – in fact, I devoutly hope this starts today – that each
member of the extension family is “well-versed” in his and her

importance to student recruitment. Not just because student recruitment is important to the university, and certainly to our College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, but because, in my opinion, an emphasis on student recruitment is in Cooperative Extension's enlightened self-interest.

I spoke earlier of how the tide that raises one boat raises all boats; I will tell you I believe that devoutly for all divisions of the Institute. When we have strong enrollments, we have tuition dollars that help cover university budget costs. When we do not have strong enrollments, people may look elsewhere for expense dollars. Research, teaching, and extension education are ¹intertwined in the Institute, and we rise and fall together. Student recruitment is important to you and to me.

I can't begin to guess the modes of delivery we'll use to provide Nebraskans with education 10 years from now, but I am confident that as technology provides us with new methods, we will be putting them to good use to meet the needs of Nebraska. New technology offers us tremendously exciting possibilities, but "High

Tech” does not replace the importance of “High Touch.” We always must be engaged with the public, maintaining our credibility and validity. We must always build and continually maintain our local connections – with county commissioners and supervisors, with state leaders, with commodity groups, businesses, etc.

This is our goal; this is our job – to provide extension education Nebraskans can put to use in their lives. Extension education that matters. Working together, we take the resources of Nebraska’s great land-grant university to the citizens of our state.

This is a [“]vital job [”] you do. Thank you for doing it so well. Thank you.

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