

A fissure in focus?

Stakeholders' perceptions of needs and priorities at local, state, national, and international levels

Dr. Lauri M. Baker, Anissa M. Zagonel, and Dr. Ricky Telg, University of Florida

BACKGROUND

- Extension by its connection to universities has become more global in its activities.
- It can be challenging to balance Extension's efforts to support local needs with the pursuit of international/national recognition.
- To mitigate future difficulties, an assessment of these balances often occurs in organizations during strategic planning to ensure stakeholders understand, respect, and see value in the organization's efforts.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to understand stakeholders' perspectives of the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) and its Extension activities.

METHODS

- Six online focus groups were held in the spring/summer of 2021.
- 45 participants (association leaders, producers who represented the state's agriculture and natural resource [ANR] sectors, and community leaders).
- Questions were related to the University/Extension's efforts and support to stakeholders and where participants thought the University/Extension should be in the future. Each question was asked with multiple focuses: local, statewide, nationwide, international, and industry level.
- Glaser's constant comparative method was used.

RESULTS

Theme 1:

Responsibility and Profitability of ANR

Participants felt teaching, research, and Extension had a direct role and responsibility for the profitability of agricultural sectors in the state. The University/Extension was seen as a resource and key component of the ANR industry's survival.



"You could talk for days about either teaching, research, or Extension. Holistically and together and in a very simple statement, they should be working to ensure profitability of all their stakeholders, especially agriculture."

"The work done by all three segments of Extension, teaching, and research just basically undergird the foundation of the economic engine of all commodity groups across the state."

CONCLUSIONS

- The balance between international/national work and local/state work is difficult to maintain in the eyes of stakeholders.
- If stakeholders do not share the values of the work, they will not support the long-term success of the organization.
- University and Extension systems need to develop messaging related to the "why" behind international/national recognition. Framing messages with how the benefits of international/national work enhances ANR and local/state communities could be useful.

Theme 2:

Too Much Focus on International and National Recognition

Participants felt the University of Florida, and by association, UF/IFAS and Extension were more concerned with the pursuit in becoming a nationally recognized, top-ranked university, rather than serving the state, its industries, and its people. Participants did not see benefits from international efforts unless it directly served their industry.



"I don't see a place that I want UF/IFAS nationally or internationally, unless it's using the research to defend our industry."

"From an outsider looking in, it's almost just for the benefit of the University of Florida. If they can tout themselves around the country saying, 'Look at what we've done,' and doing so it's at the cost and detriment of agriculture in the Florida."