J. OF THE NORTHEASTERN AGR. ECON. COUNCIL VOL. VII, NO. 2, OCTOBER, 1978

MULTI-STATE COOPERATION IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMING

Samuel M. Leadley

Are there observable systematic forces that encourage or discourage participation by individuals, departments and colleges in cooperative multi-state, multi-university research and extension rural development work?[1] A better understanding of these forces could lead to recommendations for improved management strategies.[2]

What data will be used for this analysis? I have been a participant observer of this cooperative process since 1965 when I first became involved in multi-state extension youth leadership development.[3] Subsequent exposure came through regional research and extension efforts. Most recently, for the past academic year I have worked full-time in the 12 state Northeast region at the Regional Center for Rural Development — one might think of this last experience as a baptism by total immersion. Additional data came from secondary sources as cited.

Evidence of Cooperation

What do I have to report, especially from my vantage point of recent months? First, let me set the stage for you. The stage itself is the 12 state Northeast region; the props are the fourteen land-grant universities. The actors vary in terms of social complexity. At one time the relevant actor may be an individual faculty member. At other times the actor may be a department or a college-level administrative office.

Now, on to the job of documenting the forms and amount of multi-state cooperation for rural development research and extension.[4] On the research side we have seven regional research projects in rural development.[5] Forty-three different scientists staff these projects with a scientist year (SY) commitment of 15.[6] In addition, to assist in planning for new regional research there are three multi-state scientist committees.[7] Administratively, we have NERC and NERA to coordinate institutional investments in research across the 12-state region.[8]

Under the Joint Council of Food and Agricultural Sciences, we also have a regional rural development research steering committee.[9] To insure adequate planning and coordination, ESCOP of NASULGC is around to pick up loose ends.[10]

The Cooperative Extension Service multi-state activities are organized differently. One form of cooperation is evidenced by two rural development related extension publication offices which have been established since 1970; NRAES at Cornell and NEPP at Rutgers.[11] In 1978, 11 states joined together to cooperatively sponsor an extension lay leaders forum in Washington, D.C.[12] Further, the three southern New England states began joint programming for small farms extension in 1977.[13] In a recent cooperative effort, the Northeast Public Policy Committee and the Northeast Committee on Individual and Family Concerns jointly sponsored two multi-state in-service education housing conferences for extension professionals.[14] Administratively, we have NERO and ECOP to coordinate extension efforts in the region.[15]

Samuel M. Leadley is Associate Professor of Rural Sociology, Pennsylvania State University. At the time this paper was prepared he was Associate Director, Northeastern Regional Center for Rural Development, Ithaca, N.Y. The Author wishes to acknowledge the usefull review comments of Sam Cordes and Dan Moore.

[1] As a means of narrowing this analysis to a managable size, only work in research and informal education (extension) among land-grant institutions is considered.

[2] This discussion starts from the assumption that multi-state cooperation is generally good. Needed is empirical evidence that establishes conditions under which multi-state efforts either do or do not have a comparative advantage over single-state programming.

[3] All of the limitations of the participant-observer methodology, therefore, apply to this analysis. Rather than providing an opportunity for testing hypotheses, this experience is more productive for generating hypotheses for later testing using more rigorous scientific methodologies.

[4] Cooperation is defined as action taken by professional personnel from two or more states supposedly for their mutual benefit. Categories of cooperation included are:

a. Administrative planning (e.g. budgets, interinstitutional policy)
b. Scientist planning (e.g. problem definition, substantive content, methodology)
c. Scientist implementation (e.g. data collection and analysis, writing for scientific and lay audiences)

Some cooperative efforts are implemented by each participant performing part of the work. Other activities are funded jointly but the work is done by a single designated department, college or organization.

[5] NE-89, 90, 97, 100, 119, 120 and 121. These represent 14 percent (N = 51) of the total number of regional research projects active January 1, 1977 in the Northeast.

[6] These 43 scientists represent 27 percent (N = 157) of the total state and regional research commitment to rural development research in the Northeast as of June 30, 1977. The 15 SY's represent 38 percent of the total state and regional commitment to rural development research in the Northeast as of June 30, 1977.

[7] NEC 21, 23, 24. These represent 27 percent (N = 11) of the total number of regional research planning committees active January 1, 1977 in the Northeast.

[8] NERC — Northeast Regional Coordinator (for Research). NERA — Northeast Regional Association (of Agricultural Experiment Stations). Source: Fortmann, pp. 2, 6, 7.

[9] See Lee M. Day, "The National Regional Research Planning System: An Example from Rural Development." Paper presented at Northeast Agricultural Economics Council Annual meeting, June 20, 1978, Durham, N.H. and Title XIV, Secion 1407 of the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977.

[10] ESCOP — Experiment Station Committee on Organization and Policy, Experiment Station Section, Division of Agriculture, National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges. Source: Fortmann, p. 2.

[11] NRAES — Northeast Regional Agricultural Engineering Service — Robert Parsons, 425-A Riley Robb Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y. 14853

NEEP — northeast Extension Publication Program — Russell Smith, Blake Hall, Cook College, Box 231, New Brunswick, N.J. 080903

[12] CT, DE, MD, MA, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT and WV. Some states have state-level extension advisory councils while others draw on an **ad hoc** basis from county advisory committees.

[13] Two persons are employed jointly by CT, MA, and RI. [Editors note: See the paper by Christensen, Ecker and Wallace, this Journal issue.]

[14] Two conferences were held in February (Harrisburg, PA) and March (Windsor Locks, CT), 1978 on housing involving approximately 100 extension staff.

[15] NERO — Northeast Regional Organization (of Extension Services) ECOP — Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, Extension Section, Division of Agriculture, National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges.

In addition to these research and extension activities, the Northeast Center itself encourages and supports multi-state rural development work. We can conclude, therefore, that there is indeed a substantial amount of cooperative activity in our region and it takes a variety of forms. Next, let us examine the forces that mold participation in cooperative efforts.[16]

Extra-University Forces

While several forces originate from within the university, others come from outside. Let us look at four such extra-university forces. One of the major research funding sources, USDA-SEA/CR, has a legislative mandate to see that 20 percent of federal research dollars spent in states is allocated to multi-state research. This support is not earmarked, however, for regional rural development work. Thus, it is possible for a college to spend all the money on non-rural development. There is not a complementary rule for extension funds.

Also, costs of long distance communication are relatively lower now than in the past due to improvements in communications technology. WATS telephone lines, inexpensive copying of complex documents and computer terminals operating from telephone lines all illustrate potential substitutes for expensive travel. These changes facilitate communication and, therefore, favor multi-state cooperation.

On the negative side, some states have rules to limit out-of-state travel. These rules appear to apply more frequently to extension than research faculty. In all cases, nevertheless, their effect is to reduce individual motivation; faculty members seem to just give up and say, "Why fight the system?"

Intra-University Forces

Turning to the intra-university forces we have to remember to distinguish between individuals, departments and college-level adminstrative offices. From an individual faculty member's perspective, for either research or extension, I argue that personal interests and work styles are major factors. That is, we all know faculty who are loners and run their own show. In contrast, there are those of us who thrive on interaction and prefer to work as part of an academic team.

At the interface between the individual and the university as a complex organization is the reward system. Depending on the stage of the professional life cycle in which one finds a faculty member, the immediacy of tangible evidence of academic productivity may be given a different priority. The tenured full professor may not perceive the urgency for an established extension program or scholarly publications in the same way as an untenured professor with only two years remaining before final tenure review. A department head interested in keeping quality faculty may see the situation in a manner similar to the assistant professor.

[16] Dan Moore, rural sociologist at Penn State, suggests the usefulness of thinking beyond the limits used here. Rather than focusing just on what has been and is going on cooperatively among states, what forms could cooperation take if other forces were at work? What might emerge if a large proportion of competitive grants monies specified multi-state participation? Or, if printing costs continue to increase at accelerating rates, will new forms of multi-state production of extension materials emerge? Further, this examination of forces molding participation focuses primarily on the individual scientist rather than emphasizing institutional and administrative activities. Finally, the conceptual tools selected to answer this question came from an eclectic tool bench. While they seem to work for me, I offer apologies to theoretical purists and any others whose concepts I may have used improperly.

In an earlier session today a speaker noted that the gestation period for regional work and elephants are about the same — two years. For many younger faculty who want to reduce the risk of unfavorable promotion-tenure reviews, participating in multi-state cooperative efforts is at best hazardous when one considers their typical elephantine rate of progress. In some instances, however, the uninitiated assistant professor is encouraged to take advantage of a "terrific opportunity" in regional research. Perhaps this advice and encouragement is misplaced and more senior faculty should be involved in these multi-state activities.

Changing our focus now to the university as a complex bureaucracy, let's look at more forces. The absolute numbers of professionals to do rural development work is quite limited in the Northeast region. In some settings there may be as few as two persons while at other universities one may find as many as nine or ten persons with either partial or full commitment to rural development research and extension. Flexibility to respond to new opportunities for multi-state programs in extension and research without entirely abandoning ongoing programs probably is dependent on the magnitude of the human resource base at a particular university. Universities with more limited faculty numbers are less able to participate effectively within the traditional patterns of regional research and extension committees. The fragmentation of regional research funds among many projects (e.g., 0.1 or less SY commitments per project) often precludes substantial work by scientists who may be assigned to two or even three multi-state projects.

Further, the past two decades may have brought with them changes in both level of academic specialization and job definitions. Rather than being a subject matter generalist in either rural sociology or resource economics, we find current-day professionals more likely to deal with more narrow substantive areas such as health economics, local government finance, industrial development, interagency relations, volunteer management and so on. At the same time there has been a tendency for Northeast land grant extension specialists to become more involved in research and teaching — a broadening of responsibilities. The full-time extension specialist in rural development at the university is getting harder to find than in the past.

The net result of these two trends is difficult to estimate. My qualitative assessment is that individual faculty perceive themselves as under greater pressure now than in the past due to personal aspirations, peer expectations and organizational performance norms. University administrators eem to be more frustrated in their attempts to monitor faculty productivity in two or even three areas of performance. Thus, increasing administrative weight is brought to bear on faculty to document their achievements in some tangible way as input to the performance review process.

These changes have reduced effective, voluntary participation in multi-state cooperative activity in rural development. With retrenchment a more common event and budget cuts commonplace, an out-of-state activity with only a long-term payoff for a faculty person who feels he or she already has too much to do may be seen as the straw that will break the camel's back.

Another organizational force is the administrators' view of efficiency. We all know the common definition for this term; output divided by input. The definition of what is output is not clear. What is research productivity? Results adopted by users in applied settings (e.g., farmers, food processors, industrial managers, homemakers, community decision makers)? Results

cited by other scientists? Incorporation of findings in new legislation or administrative regulations? Number of articles in selected high prestige academic journals?

What is extension productivity? Number of meetings held and number of persons in attendance? Recommendations adopted by one's clientele? Frequency of use of ones audio-visual materials by county extension staff? Number of subject matter letters distributed to county mailings lists?

Thus, efficiency is hard to estimate when output measures are ambiguous. This can lead to overt attention to reducing costs (impact) without paying as much attention to effects on hard-to-measure output.

For example, it makes very good sense to reduce the cost of developing extension publications by having multi-state cooperation. Rather than produce essentially the same bulletin independently at two or more places, why not cooperate and have just one person write the publication? It can be printed in one place for all participating states at a lower per unit cost. Input is reduced.

But, what happened to output, the other half of the efficiency equation? Using an extension bulletin as the example, if you measure output in terms of materials actually used and accepted by clientele, we have little evidence one way or the other about regional **vs.** state-specific publications. The fact may be that in some subjects acceptance of either type is equal but in other subjects state-specific bulletins are accepted at a significantly higer rate. It may be possible to reduce output at a rate faster than costs so as to actually decrease efficiency.

Equal attention may be needed to both input and output to select from among all possible multi-state activities those that increase efficiently.

Recommendations

What might be done by both individual faculty and administrators to encourage higher output with present resources through multi-state cooperation? Several elements seem to be necessary if one concurs with the above analysis of forces. One, not all faculty appear to be productive in this setting — so, selection is a crucial process. Two, the most cost-effective means of long distance communication need to be utilized. Three, locations with small numbers of professional personnel may need to use different participation strategies in multi-state activities than sites with larger resource bases. Four, extension and research faculty performance in regional activities may have to be evaluated with different criteria than in-state, single-site work. Five, more attention to the effects of input changes on productivity (output) would be desirable.

How does all of this fit into a strategy? I think of it as a maturation strategy.[17] While the injection of extra resources, e.g., extra funds for more frequent face-to-face interaction of participants, may speed up the process slightly, I am increasingly of the opinion that like many other physical, biological and social processes, the growth and development of multi-state teams is a slow process of maturation. Perhaps what might work best is to nuture more carefully the undeveloped common interests among professionals. Some of these are already known through mechanisms of common teaching assignments, participation in professional meetings such as the AAEA, NAEC, RSS, and CDSA, and regional research and extension committees. Perhaps additional identification of common interests could be encouraged by directors, department heads and the Center.

Further, I feel that trying out new voluntary groupings of professionals on a small scale is better than full scale commitments where faculty are administratively assigned to attend meetings. Perhaps once a group of persons sharing common research or extension interests is identified, they may wish to meet to exchange views through written papers, audio-visual presentations or other means of communication suitable to the subject; this should be encouraged. Out to these continuing communication activities could come individual state efforts. In extension these might be small-scale programs or publications sharing a common syllabus or outline. In research they might be small, single-state short-term projects sharing common variables and/or methods.

Out of these shared single-state experiences could come working groups of compatible professionals who want to work together on regionally integrated efforts in both extension and research. If the development of such research and extension teams is a continuous process, fewer resources probably would have to be devoted to administrative committees for identifying and prioritizing extension and research needs.

My major point is not to extend deliberately the time to get regional work started. Rather, it is to suggest that adequate time is needed for the maturation of a team as a precondition to greater productivity in multi-state settings.

[17]This could be called, "Care and Feeding of Multi-State Teams."

REFERENCES

Day, Lee M. "The National Research Planning System: An Example from Rural Development." *Journal of Northeast Agricultural Economics Council.* (This issue)

Fortmann, H. R. *The Dictionary.* University Park, PA: Northeast Regional Association of Agricultural Experiment Stations. 1978.