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WELFARE REFORM: THE LAND GRANT UNIVERSITY RESPONSE

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The Stimulus—A Call for Action

In 1995-96, our nation re-examined the social contract held with various groups for years—farm subsidies, Social Security, Medicare/Medicad, food stamps and assistance to families—welfare. At issue, in the case of welfare reform, were the causes of poverty; need for, and sources of, assistance; solutions; locus of control and funding. The debate often lacked empirical evidence and was frequently fueled by personal values, opinions, emotions and prevailing wisdom.

Such a situation presented an opportunity for inclusion of voices with authority and concern about the well-being of the children, youths and families, as well as of the nation. The conditions were right for the resources of the land grant university system to be mobilized—for its expertise to be applied to the problems, issues and opportunities surrounding welfare reform.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly explain some of the responses between 1995 and 1997, and plans for continued involvement in welfare reform.

The Opportunity

In general, the intent of welfare reform was to hold adults personally responsible for the self-sufficiency of themselves and their families. Such an intent requires that families have the skills to obtain, maintain and manage their total resource mix—personal, family and community—in ways that serve the individual, family and society.

Passage of the federal Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 changed 61 years of “welfare” programs as we have known them. A driver for this change was the belief that better decisions about financing and providing support services could be made by states and counties.

Better decisions can only be made if the people making the decisions respond knowledgeably to the opportunity—to move beyond welfare for poor families to the well-being of all members of our communities. Wise decision making early in the reformation process, when communities have increased say in designing and shaping assistance programs, will pay dividends into the 21st Century as parents and their children increase their ability to be personally responsible and self-sufficient. Thus,

the need for expertise, based on family-centered research, presented the opportunity for the family and consumer sciences profession, formerly known as home economics, to engage in public policy education (Bauer and Braun).

The Response: Mobilization of the Land Grant System

Historically, the land grant system has the mission of discovering and disseminating knowledge, extending expertise and contributing to the public work of citizens. The land grant system, with its sister universities and its federal partner at USDA, was, and is, uniquely situated to bring its research into the public policy debate through its outreach arm—the Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service (CSREES). CSREES is continually challenged to extend the expertise of the land grant system to help people prevent, reduce or resolve problems and issues and to find opportunities to improve the quality of life.

Therefore, public policy makers, with frequent input from citizens, fund the Cooperative Extension Service (CES) through a unique cooperative arrangement of public and private contributions of tax dollars, donations, grants, contracts and volunteer time and talents. Its means of education—enabling people to apply research where they live and work—is the important public work of the CES.

The creation of the nationwide CES in 1914 grew out of the renewed thinking of the late 19th Century that government is an instrument of citizens, and that citizens need the capacity for public work and self action (Peters). The CES was charged with development of those capacities through widespread education. According to Harry Boyte at the University of Minnesota's Hubert H. Humphrey Institute, the CES of the late 20th Century stands as an example of a government program that continues to have potential to regenerate widespread civic capacity (Boyte and Kari). Thus, the CES is challenged to partner with citizens to strengthen their capacity for informed action—for building what Boyte calls "civic muscle."

Civic muscle is democracy of the people, by the people and for the people. It is "people power" from the Greek meaning of democracy—"demos," meaning people and "kratia," meaning power. It is people engaging in important public work to "meet common challenges and build a common future." Welfare reform, with its shift to state and local decision making, presented another opportunity for the nationwide system to support citizens in that work. Seizing the opportunity, the Board of Human Sciences (BOHS), of the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC), responded.

NASULGC Board of Human Sciences (BOHS). In January, 1995, BOHS, through its Legislative Committee, accepted the challenge of engagement in public policy by addressing the meaning of welfare reform in contemporary society. The committee monitored legislation, offered a set of principles—based on family

research—to test proposed legislation and critiqued legislation both through direct contacts with Congressional delegates and staff, or indirectly through the services of AESOP and staff at NASULGC.

Until the signing of the legislation on August 22, 1996, the BOHS mobilized its members to share research and principles. A report, *Welfare Reform: Social Justice for Children and Families*, was updated and distributed. It has served as a foundation for families' understanding of assistance programs since 1935.

After the legislation became law, the BOHS convened two think tanks at the University of Georgia to identify strategies to further mobilize the resources of research and outreach throughout the system. Recommendations were adopted and a Rapid Response Team authorized to conduct a satellite broadcast and convene a national conference. One was held in January 1997; the other in April 1997. The findings of the conference are posted through the web sites of the University of Minnesota (CYFERNET); USDA Cooperative State Research, Extension and Education Service (CSREES) and the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC). A list-serve was created to encourage communications. (For web site information, see <http://www.cyfernet.umn.edu/welfare>.) Following the conference, a steering committee was formed to guide the work over the next several years. Subcommittees are focusing on research, extension/outreach, academic programs, legislation, communications and capacity building.

The NASULGC Response. Peter McGrath, President of NASULGC, first spoke to the importance of engaging the land grant system in welfare reform at the national meeting in November 1996. The next three issues of the newsletter carried articles about welfare reform. An internal committee and an external coalition were created. Staff monitored legislative changes, particularly in the budget bill that passed in the summer of 1997. A general session at the 1997 annual meeting will focus on welfare reform.

The NASULGC Extension Committee on Policy (ECOP) Response. ECOP responded by creating a task force which is to encourage programming directed at people moving off welfare into the workforce; people trying to stay off public assistance; employers who are hiring people off welfare; agency personnel coping with changes in the system and citizens through continued public policy education. They also created a Workforce Preparedness Task Force.

CSREES Response. The CSREES at USDA is actively engaged in welfare reform through its task force. They collaborated with NASULGC and the Economic Research Service to plan and execute the April conference. They are seeking funding to support web-based information dissemination and have identified faculty or administrative contacts in each state. They are serving on the various committees and task forces identified above.

Rationale for Continued Involvement

There continues to be a contemporary need for additional research to both monitor change resulting from welfare reform and measure impact—on children, youths, families, communities, businesses, etc. These research needs have applications at the national level for future policy making, as well as at the state and local levels where the impact is most direct. There is a need for analysis of research done by others outside the land grant system. Who is better situated to conduct research and analyze findings than the faculty and students of the land grant system? Additionally, in understanding the impact on children and families where they live and work, who better than the community of human, family and consumer sciences and their allies?

In addition to the discovery of knowledge, there is a major need for disseminating the findings of all research to those who need to make and implement policy and programs; to students; and to citizens. This dissemination needs to be done in a timely manner through multiple means of communication. Who is better equipped to extend expertise than the outreach arm of the land grant system through its networks of human beings in all states and territories, and its electronic capacities through its distance education consortium, A*DEC?

Welfare Reform—The Future for Society

As Robert J. Samuelson said, “The new welfare system is a work in progress, and only time will tell whether it’s a work of progress.” With the application of the expertise of the land grant system, there is reason to believe that progress can be made and measured. The realization of that progress lies in the commitment of the system, of its faculty, students, staff and administrators, and of our ability to attract or redirect resources toward the challenge. Only time will tell if we have the will to sustain what was begun in 1995 when the BOHS asked itself, “If we don’t respond, who will?”

References

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