

Developing Collaborative Partnerships with Chambers of Commerce

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Although not often listed as collaborative partners of Extension, chambers of commerce have a long history of being involved with community agricultural improvements. In 1911, Byers Gitchell, Secretary of the Binghamton New York Chamber of Commerce proposed for the establishment of a department to extend to farmers the same opportunities for cooperation enjoyed by city business owners. After a study of Gitchell's proposal, the Binghamton Chamber of Commerce agreed to establish a farm bureau. The organization acquired funding from the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad to test the proposed farm bureau. A farm agent would travel within a 50-mile radius to address farm production issues utilizing USDA and New York State College of Agriculture recommendations. Following the first year, the travel was adjusted to cover Broome County only. It was this experiment which influenced Seaman Knapp, commonly called the father of Extension, and his concept of how to develop and structure Cooperative Extension (Ramussen, 2002).

As large corporations continue to locate in Tennessee along with it being the destination of retirees seeking to relocate here, outlier urban centers and suburbia are advancing into rural areas. This phenomenon is providing UT Extension an opportunity to expand its community economic development (CED) programming. A key step in this process is for Extension to build and enhance its relationship with chambers of commerce. In an effort to identify possible programming areas shared by chambers and UT Extension, an online survey was disseminated to chambers of commerce directors. Forty-six directors responded to the survey.

When asked what program areas they associated with UT Extension, chamber directors identified 4-H (24 times) slightly over agriculture (22 times). Family and consumer sciences was identified 14 times, while community economic development was identified only eight times. As UT Extension seeks ways to show value to county commissions that are changing from being characterized as being rural to suburban, the organization should seek ways to foster relationships with chambers of commerce.

The top three areas respondents indicated as areas requiring UT Extension expertise was small business development and retention, non-profit organizational management and industrial planning. The top ranked community issues needing to be address was in the following order:

1. Workforce development
2. Vacant commercial building repurposing
3. Housing initiatives
4. Three-way tie: employee management, tourism and business retention

UT Extension must recognize and accept that Tennessee is changing socially. Suggestions for UT Extension to engage with chambers of commerce are:

- UT Extension agents become authorities on how agriculture and industry can co-exist.
- UT Extension staff must be willing to serve on chamber boards of directors when recruited.
- Seek to utilize chamber leadership alumni as volunteers for UT Extension youth and social programs such On My Own and poverty simulations.

- UT Extension offices serve in county youth apprenticeship programs.
- Develop a business succession program offered through the chamber of commerce.
- Assist agriculture and non-agriculture small businesses with creating value-added opportunities.
- Promote every successful agriculture value-added project in the county.
- Promote leadership and organizational education.
- Lead county leadership program's agricultural and environmental education efforts.
- Market residential horticulture, small scale agriculture enterprises (apiaries), culinary programs, vineyard projects, and family and consumer education clubs through chamber of commerce marketing outlets.

UT Extension has a long history of maintaining productive collaborations with various agencies at all levels of government. Its 4-H program has benefitted from the strong support of public school districts across the state. Collaborative efforts between county health departments and UT Extension family and consumer sciences staff ensure the success of health councils. UT Extension agricultural professionals work jointly with Tennessee Department of Agriculture and USDA agencies to ensure our food systems remain sustainable. Similarly, improving our relationship with local chambers of commerce will aid UT Extension greatly in its efforts to make valuable contributions in the community economic development program area.

References

Ramussen, W. D. (2002). *Taking the university to the people: Seventy-five years of Cooperative Extension*: Purdue University Press.



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