



**Office of the Director  
eXtension Initiative**

University of Nebraska – Lincoln  
6 Ag Communications Building  
PO Box 830918  
Lincoln, NE 68583-0918  
Office: 402.472.8841  
Fax: 402.472.0025  
E-mail: [dan.cotton@eXtension.org](mailto:dan.cotton@eXtension.org)  
Web: [www.eXtension.org](http://www.eXtension.org)

December 14, 2007

Linda Fox, Associate Vice President and Dean  
Chair, Western Extension Directors Association  
Washington State University Extension  
P.O. Box 646248  
Pullman, WA 99164-6248

Dear Linda:

Thank you for your recent letter concerning eXtension. I appreciate knowing that while the Directors from the Western region remain supportive of eXtension there are some concerns regarding various processes. I will attempt to address each of the points you have raised. If, after reading my responses, questions remain or if you have suggestions as to how we can improve in various areas, I would welcome the opportunity to visit with you further. I know we share common goals, and building eXtension into the type of resource we know it should be requires a strong partnership and commitment by all involved.

**(1) the speed in bringing up more CoPs to serve public needs;**

Admittedly, it takes time for teams to develop into effective Communities of Practice. Identifying membership, establishing trust, defining and assigning roles, developing content, and engaging Communities of Interest are critical attributes of successful CoPs. It's importance that our content and programs are of high quality and relevance for our audiences. If not, then we shortchange our customers and that would be unacceptable. So, while time is required, doing it right far outweighs the alternative.

Interestingly, one example we are currently experiencing involves the new "Living with Fire" needs-based CoP proposed by the Western Region. Recently, they asked for additional time to develop their CoP proposal because they want to make sure their proposal is strong and involves a true collaboration among colleagues. Thus, we have extended the due date for proposals from February 1 to March 1.

Along the way, we have taken steps to help expedite the CoP application process. Prospective CoPs may now apply when they're ready rather than having to wait for the next eXtension "Call for Engagement." We now accept them at any time and once received the CoP Review Panel can quickly review it. Once a CoP is approved, they can immediately begin to work, which includes access to all available eXtension support and infrastructure.

## **(2) the quality and relevancy of the materials being made available through the COPs;**

Members of Communities of Practice are responsible for the quality and relevancy of published content. Using collaborative tools such as the wiki, a contributor may at any time add value to content. When they do so, changes are tracked, metadata may be included, content is peer reviewed and ultimately published. eXtension standards require that all published content be reviewed by at least two peers and copy edited.

Another, and very important way to ensure quality and relevancy, is to make sure your faculty and staff are eXtension contributors. You can significantly influence their participation through encouragement, providing local support (financial and/or in-kind), integrating CoP efforts with local program priorities, and inclusion in promotion and tenure processes.

## **(3) the lack of accommodation for existing quality state and local programs and web resources, particularly from the western region (e.g., energy from Washington state, natural resources and equine information from California, rangeland management from the Rangelands West partnership and the "forestandrange" initiative);**

eXtension would be very pleased for the works described above to become eXtension Communities of Practice. If there are issues that prohibit such inclusion they need to be addressed and solutions sought. For instance, if start-up funding is a problem, they could become eligible to apply to become a new Community of Practice in 2008, or we may be able to assist in helping groups pursue other sources of funds.

With regard to the inclusion of existing content, Communities of Practice decide what content will be included and whether links to existing content are appropriate or content needs to be reformatted into an eXtension format. This is the process all current Communities of Practice have followed to establish their base resources. Also, eXtension is available to assist in the transfer of content from existing sources, as appropriate.

As previously mentioned, eXtension provides Communities of Practice with a collaborative workspace in which to develop and publish shared content resources. It's important to remember that as content is developed it is considered open and viewable by all Communities of Practice, in essence it becomes a collective and aggregated set of organizational resources the entire system can access and take advantage of, while at the same time using them to leverage relationships with potential developers and certainly customers. It's this collective set of resources that truly lead to efficiencies and sharing we are interested in realizing as a system.

Another very important reason to aggregate our resources has to do with consumers' preference to use search engines as their primary choice for locating materials. Google and other search engines consider the size of the site and the number of links contained within the content to determine authority and increase discoverability. Therefore, aggregating content, with links to appropriate local materials is a strategy that benefits all of us.

eXtension is working to provide materials in standard formats that take into consideration customer preferences and makes creating educational products as seamless, as possible. The

ultimate audience is the public user and eXtension has gone through public website usability testing, which is critical for continual modification and user responsiveness. If you are interested in learning more about usability engineering, you may consider doing a Google search for work done by Jakob Nielsen.

We are also interested in making sure that use of eXtension materials by our Communities of Interest and member institutions is easy to do. So, when we tie standard formats to our intellectual property agreements, we promote sharing, extensibility, and access to our vast quantity of educational materials.

#### **(4) the lack of financial support for local involvement in the development of the Communities of Practice;**

The Governing Committee is at work to grow base funding to \$12-15 million annually. If successful, eXtension will be able to provide significant financial support for local involvement in the development of Communities of Practice. Until such increases are realized, we plan to continue providing what start-up funding we can to new Communities of Practice through “Call for Engagement” processes. Also, with the IRS granting 501c3 status this year, we can now begin to work more aggressively to identify sponsors and generate more private resources. Just recently, we have received financial commitments from Citigroup Foundation (\$7,500) and Purina (\$50,000 – to be shared with MyHorse University at Michigan State University).

Of course, another key source of financial support can come from local institutions when they choose to provide resources to faculty and staff interested in becoming a member of a Community of Practice. This is a strategy several directors are practicing as a way to leverage local work with that of eXtension and vice versa. Another example would be the Cotton Community of Practice where a number of cotton-producing states have decided to provide start-up funding. Also, CSREES has put in language in several of their competitive grants that support translating research to users through eXtension.

I guess the “take away” here is there are several ways we can assist in the development of Communities of Practice, and as time goes along we may think of other models, as well. Meanwhile, we have developed a scalable infrastructure that supports any group interested in becoming a regionally or nationally focused Community of Practice.

#### **(5) concerns about signing multi-year contracts when local benefits are still in question**

The basic premise of eXtension is as true today as it was when the National Extension Directors and Administrators (NED/A) initially decided to make the investment. It was a decision based upon the belief that working together will yield value beyond what any one institution can accomplish individually, in other words “together better than separate.” That if we work together we can better engage Communities of Interest, broaden our base of content, reduce duplication, become more efficient and generate more value in the knowledge marketplace. When visiting with Communities of Practice, those expectations are confirmed, plus they go on to say that eXtension represents....

“a stronger platform upon which to help people make decisions; a new professional challenge; the opportunity to collaborate using new technologies; an opportunity to become more visible nationally; the ability to sustain institutional and individual programs; an opportunity to share materials; the realization they don’t have to do all the work themselves; a new network of peer reviewers; opportunities for presentations, publications, awards; opportunities to turn eXtension service roles into scholarship deliverables; and a role in the “future of Cooperative Extension.”

Recently, we hired a firm to conduct a usability study of the new public interface (<http://beta.extension.org>). A group of outside reviewers, some who were familiar with Cooperative Extension and others who were not, made the following observations when using the site:

“a source of unbiased, in-depth information from university experts on a broad range of topics; an opportunity to ask university experts any question; you think more about a Web site that has information from universities; this is an informational and educational site where I can get objective, unbiased information; a place to go when I want to learn something; and this is much better than Wikipedia, where you don’t know how accurate the information is.”


The last comment really captures the essence of what eXtension is.

In summary, it takes time to create the value we all seek, and if we don’t take the time to do it right, we may never get the chance to do so again. Only now we are beginning to launch the first public Community of Practice resources and twenty-six CoPs are in various stages of formation and implementation. Hopefully, in the near future you will begin to see an exponential return on investment, one that is about meeting the needs of a socially-networked world and doing so in a way that meets people’s needs in an ever-changing and technologically reliant society.

I hope these responses are helpful and give you a better idea as to current thinking within eXtension. Meanwhile, we will continue to seek ways to improve processes associated with building Communities of Practice. If you would like to discuss any of these issues further, just let me know. Thank you again for the questions, I appreciate getting the chance to respond.

I hope several Western Directors will consider attending the national eXtension launch at the USDA’s 2008 Ag Outlook Forum in Washington, DC. It promises to be a great event and an opportunity to visit with Community of Practice leaders who will be hosting exhibits and briefing attendees about their work.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dan Cotton".

Dan Cotton  
Director, eXtension