

April 2009

County Extension Council Listening Session Summary

While the current economic environment forces Iowa State University Extension to change, it also presents an opportunity to examine our traditional structure and practices. ISU Extension employees and County Extension Councils in a series of listening session surveys provided innovative ideas that could lead to a more robust enterprise.

This report summarizes the County Council input.

County Councils were asked to provide input on ways ISU Extension could best handle impending budget cuts. Councils were first asked to watch a short pre-recorded statement from Jack Payne on the forecasted budget cuts before responding to an online survey. Ideas were solicited in three broad areas: organization, operations, and support services.

Seventy-six surveys were completed. Some of the surveys represented the views of a single council member, while others summarized the views of all nine members. Overall, 347 cost saving suggestions were included in the survey responses.

Cost saving ideas were analyzed and sorted into the same 25 categories as the ISU Extension staff suggestions. Items related to “improving operational efficiencies” were suggested most frequently. The following categories ranked slightly below “improving operational efficiencies”:

- restructuring area offices
- increasing revenue generation
- restructuring county offices
- eliminating programs, field specialists, and state specialists

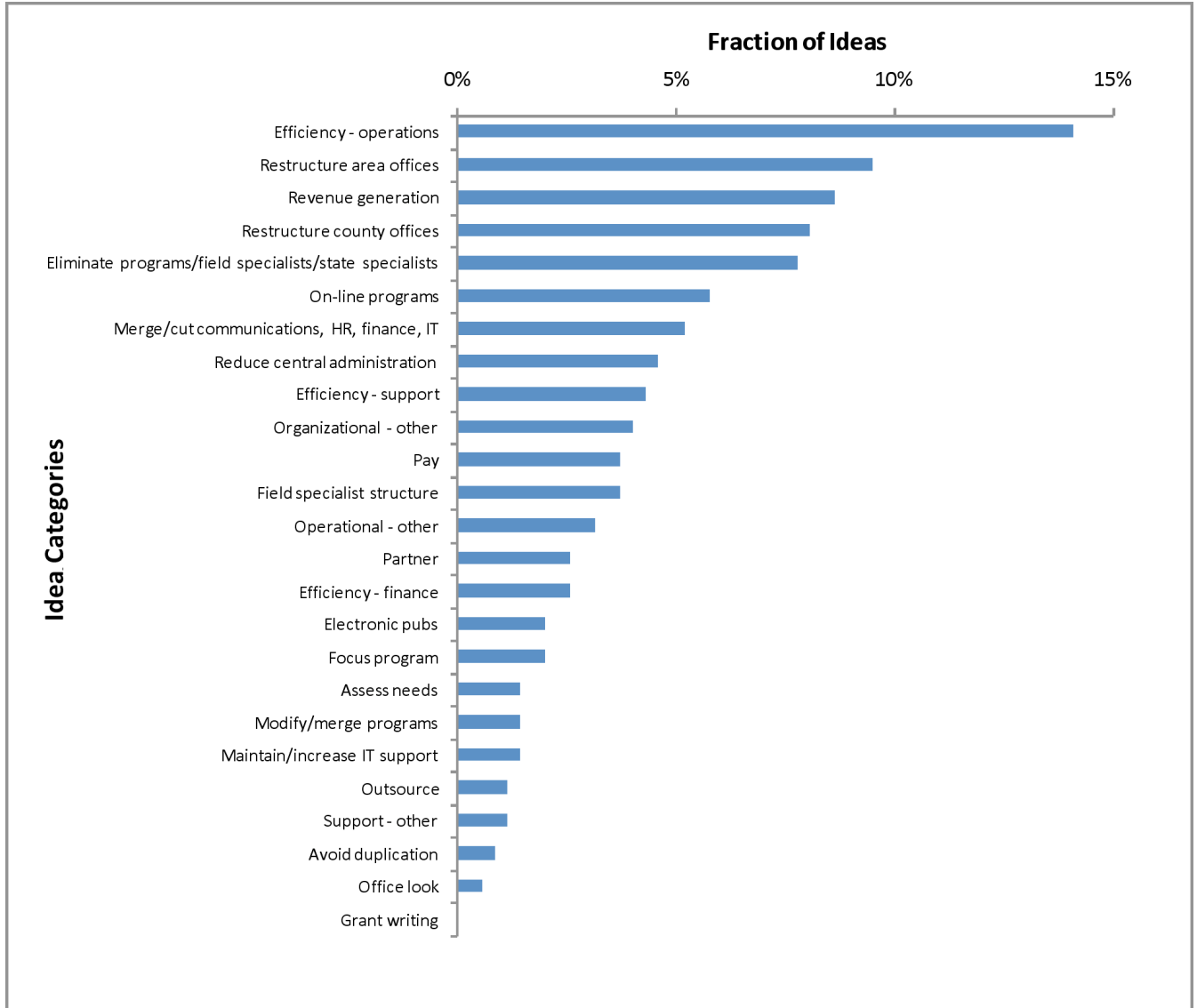
Following these suggestions was a lower ranked group:

- developing online programs
- merging/cutting communications, HR, finance, IT
- reducing central administration
- increasing the efficiency of support services
- reorganizing-other
- cutting pay
- restructuring field staff

These top 12 categories encompassed 80 percent of all comments received.

Figure 1 displays a summary of the listening session comments. With nearly 350 total ideas put forward, a 10 percent reading in the figure corresponds to about 35 suggestions.

Figure 1: Summary of online results.



Summary Details

The most frequently suggested ideas fell into the category of *efficiency-operations*. These suggestions generally relate to how we do our work. The suggestions in the category *efficiency-support* tend to be operational as well, but applied specifically to support units. Efficiency-related comments include:

“We need to do a better job of sharing programs among the counties. Many of the programs we do are repeated over and over again. But staff time, resources are used to develop this individually in each area when we could have the same program and then just tweak it to our area, saving time and money for all.”

“Review the cost effectiveness and value of the publications.”

“Encourage more communication by Internet and computers.”

“Can we have the flexibility to provide services from other states rather than duplicate research and publications?”

“Lean up steps in Human Resources. For example, if vacation days are now reported to an administrative assistant at area level and they report those into a bigger system, skip the intermediate step. The same is true for messages from Human Resources. They should keep their website up to date and send out notices of new information; the area director is not needed as a filter. All human resources functions should be greatly streamlined.”

After efficiency, the next highest ranked categories were: restructuring area offices; increasing revenue generation; restructuring county offices; and eliminating programs, field specialists, and state specialists.

Restructuring area offices includes suggestions regarding reductions, merging with counties, sharing of staff, and elimination of a level of management. Specific comments include:

“Assign area offices to manage a county.”

“Eliminate area administration.”

Revenue generation suggestions include comments like:

“Take approach of NRCS and let farmers purchase technical support.”

“Increase cost share offices pay to ISU.”

“There are MANY things that Extension does well that we need to charge the State and others when they request those services; not necessarily eliminate the service, but review how it is funded.”

Restructuring county offices includes suggestions regarding the number of offices, rules for consolidation, and office location. Specific comments include:

“Drastically restructure to reduce number of offices and maintain youth programs and provide other needed services. Will begin process of governmental consolidation (Maybe). ... 2. Close county offices, have one office per four counties.”

“It should be no surprise to Extension or the public that a reduction of offices may be in order. Technology and our social environment have changed immensely. Customers obtain information on the website; if they can’t find it, they call or email. Communication from Extension to inquiries, registrants, and club members is relayed via snail mail, email, and even texting, Twitter, Facebook, etc. Customers (and their parents) are at their jobs from 8 to 5 every day. They typically cannot stop at the local extension office.”

“The counties that are growing in population and participation in extension programs should be the locations that remain.”

Eliminating programs/field specialists/state specialists includes suggestions like:

“The field staff are who Extension is to the community, they are who they see, who they work with. They should remain. I believe that the staff at the university should be cut.”

“Re-evaluate number and type of field specialists.”

“Conduct a cost benefit analysis of each program and reduce or eliminate those with the least benefit.”

Following this second grouping of ideas is a group of lower ranked suggestions: developing online programs; merging/cutting communications, HR, finance, IT; reducing central administration; increasing the efficiency of support services; reorganizing-other; cutting pay; and restructuring field staff.

Ideas regarding *online programs* include items like:

“More webcasts could be utilized.”

“Go to Web-based programming.”

Merge/cut support services suggestions include recommendations about the Communications, HR, IT, and Finance units and staff within Extension. Specific comments include:

“Significantly reduce and refocus external relations and deliver from campus.”

“Less staff means less support staff needed. Area office could become part of county office to cut down on office space cost.”

Reduce central administration includes comments like:

“If downsizing is the answer, then it must start at the administrative level.”

“Make Extension flatter. A good leader can manage a large number of good workers.”

Ideas regarding *pay cuts* include items like:

“In our county, according to the Employee Manual, we are paying for vacation/sick leave/retirement benefits for part-time employees. I don’t know of any private companies paying these benefits to part-time employees, and see no reason for this to be done for government employees.”

“Furlough days will work for the short-term. The only true savings, long-term, will come from salary cuts and eliminating staff.”

Field specialist structure recommendations include:

“Use county directors as specialists in areas of expertise.”

“District specialists work within their district, but also maintain an area of expertise that could be shared statewide. Not all districts need to have livestock specialists, as parts of the state don’t have livestock and have mostly crops.”

The 11 categories discussed above encompassed 76 percent of all comments received. Fewer than 10 suggestions were made in each of the next 11 categories. Together, these next categories comprise 16 percent of all comments made.

Suggestions regarding *partners* include:

“Let’s network with other organizations in our community and county.”

“Partner with economic development organizations in each of the counties.”

Efficiency-finance recommendations include:

“Cougar Mountain does not appear to be a cost-effective system for the state or counties. Need to cut losses and explore systems that are supported with training outside of Extension, such as Quickbooks.”

Electronic publications recommendations include:

“In order to help clients be successful we need to instruct older individuals in the use of technology so they can feel skilled and confident in accessing our system. Once this is done, clients can better access our system. From here they can have access to our publications and other information. This way the client can read and print what they need at their home computer and save extension dollars on printing publications and other materials. For those who have no home computer, we can have one in our local office for clients to come and use and they can pay for anything they print while they are there.”

“Email the newsletters to 4-H families and any other groups vs. mailing them.”

Suggestions in the *focus programs* category include items like:

“We need to look at what programs are used and work to make them better and stronger.”

“Extension needs to determine core services (provided as part of mission) and then core skills that can be used to generate revenues.”

“Tighten focus of Extension to 1) 4-H Youth Development, 2) Ag and Natural Resources, and 3) Families.”

The *assess need* category includes recommendations like:

“Look carefully at use and accessibility of current services. What currently is being used by the public? What areas are now valuable to clients? How do we continue those and pare down or eliminate the others?”

“But we must also continue to evaluate the needs of our communities and create new programs to meet those needs.”

Merging/modifying programs includes items like:

“May need to combine youth and family programs.”

“At the University Center, combine and eliminate similar programs.”

Maintain/increase IT support recommendations include:

“Continued support of high speed Internet is critical.”

“I feel technology needs to be at the forefront of our concerns. We need to maintain communications for staff and up-to-date resources.”

Outsource recommendations include:

“Obviously all of the administrative activities that can be consolidated should be—maybe to private sector providers. I’m not convinced that consolidation to ISU central operations is the most cost effective in all cases. Options need to be explored.”

“Look at outsourcing HR to another area or outside the University all together.”

Avoid duplication recommendations include:

“Think outside the ‘box.’ In our county, we have tremendous duplication of services. For instance, several charities in the area offer training on how to plan/stick to a budget. Several of these organizations are looking into volunteer management software that would allow communities to coordinate volunteer opportunities and services to the community. If ISU were to implement a Web-based tool to be shared amongst community charity organizations, funds going to each charity would be better utilized, with funds going back to ISU Extension and overall costs would be reduced.”

Office look recommendations include:

“To meet the current budget cuts I would suggest considering the following. ... 5. Move field specialist to state office to eliminate duplication or house in the county office.”

“Eliminate the area offices—field specialist work from home offices to cut office expenses.”

No comments were made that could be categorized as *grant writing*.

The three *other* categories include general comments from the organization, operation, and support comments that did not readily fall into the various categories listed above or may not generate revenue savings in the short term. Comments include:

“I think the Internet is a great tool, the only problem is, is that many older people who use Extension don’t have ready access. This is an issue that needs to be addressed before limiting services.”

“Any new partnership agreement should be menu driven so that extension councils can choose which services are appropriate for their county.”

“Work to regionalize the staff at Iowa State Extension Service in Ames to all three state universities (Iowa State University, University of Iowa, and University of Northern Iowa).”

“Increase financial accountability and transparency at state level. The info provided in the annual report is very brief. What are ‘non-program specific’ expenses? It seems important as it accounts for 27.4 percent of expenditures. Being open about finances and providing a high degree of fiscal accountability is critical to all contributing partners including Extension Councils, as we are accountable to county residents for how we spend money, including the partnership agreement.”

As the new Extension model is developed, the ideas summarized in this document and the suggestions offered by Iowa State University Extension staff are being considered. It has been important to this process to reflect on the opportunities identified by so many perspectives. As appropriate, ISU Extension administrators will address these opportunities to enhance efficiencies of the ISU Extension operation.