

April 2009

Extension Staff Listening Session Summary

While the current economic environment forces 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 findings of the staff input. County Extension Council results will be reported in a separate report.

On March 24, 335 staff participated in listening sessions held in 15 locations to offer ideas on how to absorb budget cuts within Extension. Participants watched a pre-recorded statement from Jack Payne on the forecasted budget cuts before moving to group discussions.

These groups were asked, “How can we change Extension to meet current budget cuts and position ourselves for the future?” The small groups discussed budget adjustment ideas in the three general areas of:

1. **Organizational changes:** Such as changes in our organizational structure including number, size, and/or location of administrative units (campus, area, and county offices) and program units (campus, field, centers).
2. **Operational changes:** Such as changes in the range and scale of the programs and services that we provide to our clients and the ways that we provide them.
3. **Support services changes:** Such as changes in the infrastructure that supports program and service delivery including communications, human resources, information technology, administration, accounting, etc.

Each group brainstormed ideas on how to improve the effectiveness of Extension and cut costs. They then selected and submitted their top three ideas under each topic area, generating 518 cost saving suggestions.

The online survey was made available to staff that were unable to attend the listening sessions, and to give all staff another opportunity to provide comments. A total of 112 individual surveys were completed, generating 669 cost saving suggestions.

Ideas from the two groups were analyzed separately and sorted by like items. Both processes produced similar results – with suggestions falling into about 25 categories. Many of the ideas were suggested multiple times, in both the listening sessions and online.

Figure 1 displays a summary of the listening session comments. With slightly more than 500 total ideas put forward, a 1 percent reading in the figure corresponds to approximately five ideas. These five ideas may have come from just a couple of groups or from five distinct groups. If the latter case occurred, a 1 percent reading would represent the collective voice of 25 different individuals – based on an average of five member groups.

Figure 2 displays a summary of the results from the online comments. With nearly 700 total ideas put forward, a 1 percent reading in the figure corresponds to approximately seven ideas. All seven of these ideas may have come from a single individual or from seven different individuals.

Figure 1: Summary of listening session results.

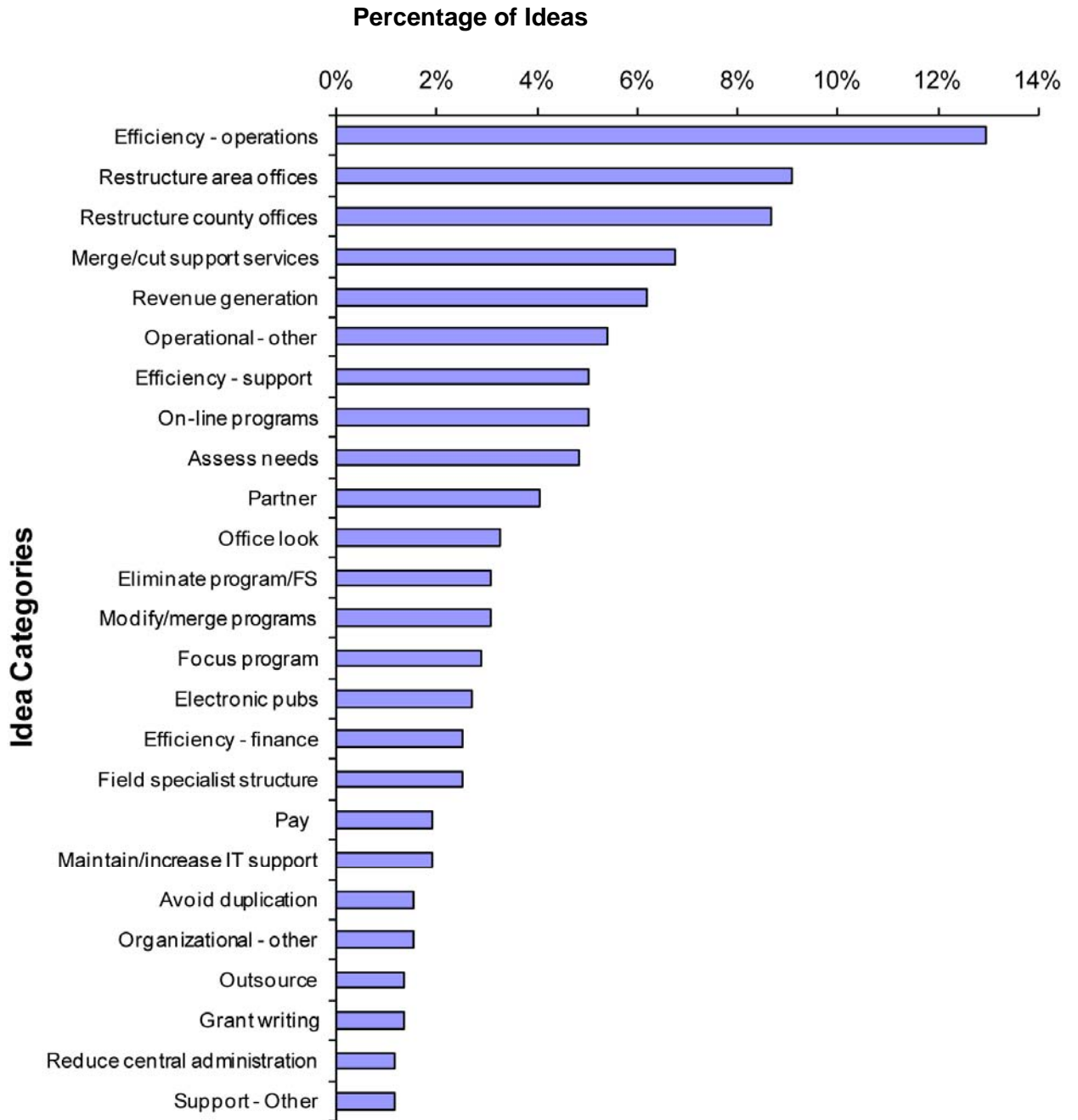
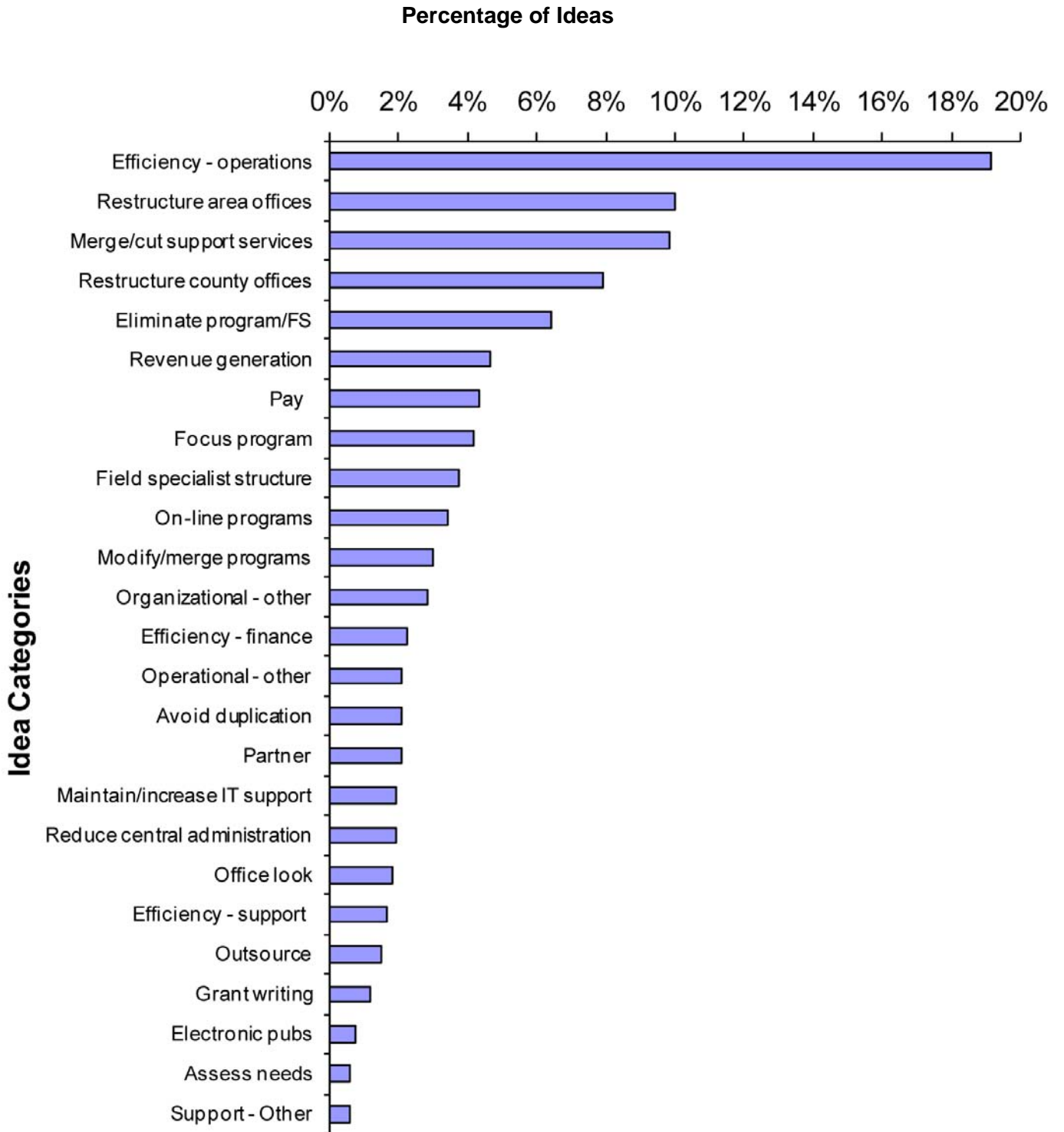


Figure 2: Summary of online results.

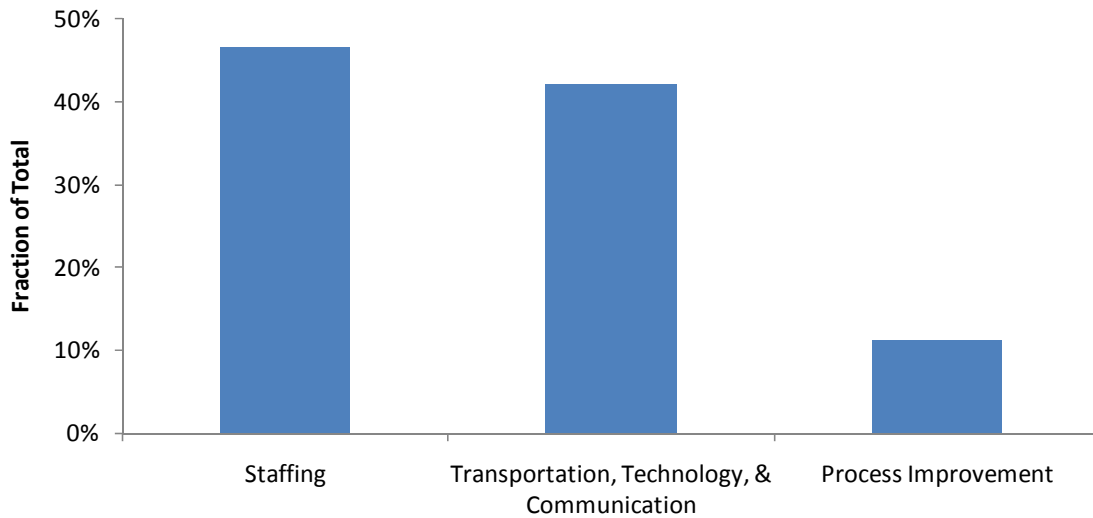


Summary Details

Both the listening sessions and the online sessions most frequently suggest ideas that could be categorized as *efficiency - operations*. These suggestions generally relate to how we do our work. The suggestions in the category *efficiency – support* tends to be operational as well, but applied specifically to support units. Since there are so many suggestions related to efficiency, an attempt is made to better categorize these ideas. The suggestions from both the operations and support categories are combined from both the listening sessions and the online suggestions, resulting in over 200 separate suggestions.

These operations-related suggestions fall into three distinct sub-categories: staffing; travel, communication, and technology; and process improvement. Figure 3 displays the distribution of comments by sub-category.

Figure 3: Operational efficiency sub-categories.



Staffing takes into account having the right number of people in the right place for the need. Comments include:

“Determine need for specialty by # of potential clients, i.e., how many swine producers in state should determine # of swine specialists.”

“The county offices should be evaluated on the effectiveness in reaching community members. If the county does not reach a pre-determined number of contacts or offer sufficient services, they should be moved in with a neighbor county office. The goal of extension is to reach people and we have that capability from another location. The number of contacts should be determined by a percentage of the county population and not just a number. We really need to ask, "How effective is the office in the community?"

“Eliminate positions where not much programming is being done and hire that person "by the job" on contract. IE: Out of state Strengthening Families train-the-trainer.”

“Reduce the hours of operation of county offices or alternate office hours (or days) between adjacent counties. One county office would be open Monday, Wednesday, Saturday and the adjacent county office would be open Tuesday, Thursday, Friday allowing us to share staff between counties and reduce staffing accordingly.”

“State level staff should be writing grants to be available to all counties for programming, instead of individual county directors spending a great deal of time in grant writing to keep their programs functioning.”

“Regional program offerings unless fee is paid to support local costs.”

“Become a wholesale provider of education and services. E.g. train-the-trainer.”

Travel, communication, and technology includes items related to reducing travel (expenses and time); improving communications; and more efficient use of technology – fewer meetings, reduced mailings (printing and postage), and program delivery methods. Comments include:

“Stop having meetings just because we have always had this particular type of meeting, i.e. annual conference, professional improvement day, area all staff meetings, etc. If there's nothing critical to discuss in person, distribute info another way.”

“Draconian cuts in travel budgets to force field specialist to work with greater efficacy.”

“Reduce reporting requirements.”

“Identify ways to make Extension a 24/7 resource for Iowans, rather than an office in the county that is only visited by a certain segment of the population.”

“Control mailings, paper, etc., being mailed from campus.”

“Eliminate duplicate phones (cell and land lines), duplicate computers (laptops and desktops), etc.”

“Have news release and program (ex. Power points, handouts, etc.) “bank” that is developed and shared amongst field specialists statewide to reduce time in creating news releases, designing programs, etc.”

“Mandatory IT training to enable staff to utilize all methods of electronic media.”

“Online enrollments for youth members. Online enrollments for 4-H families for state fair entries - see Kansas and Maryland for methods.”

Process improvement includes suggestions associated with lean processes. Comments include:

“Conduct extensive LEAN office training to evaluate processes throughout.”

“Teach “best practices” in revenue generation to staff.”

“Go Green – cheapen costs, thus more \$\$ for county cost shares”

“We should be taking nose prints for state fair animal verification. Retinal imaging equipment is expensive to purchase. It is equally expensive to share with another county and pay them for their time and services.”

After efficiency, the next highest ranked categories are: *restructuring of the area offices*, *restructuring of the county offices*, and *merging/cutting Extension support units*.

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

“Eliminate area offices. One campus Assoc. Dir. could oversee 20 regional offices. Field staff currently report to too many bosses.”

“Eliminate area offices. Reduce staff to 2 Area Directors, who have expertise in everything pertaining to CEEDs and county operations. Area Directors supervise only CEEDs and are housed on campus or in county offices.”

“Close area offices and eliminate middle management.”

“Reduce Area offices to 2 to 3 – Area Director supervise CEEDS only – Program Director supervise Specialists only.”

“Can Area Offices be consolidated and housed within the nearest or largest county office serving that area?”

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

“Close smaller county Extension offices (combine based upon retirements, tax base, population, and needs.”

“Close county offices. Create four to six regional education centers in cooperation with Community Colleges. Combine Community Colleges with the Board of Regents to eliminate competition.”

“Consolidate county offices into regional clusters (eight to ten counties per cluster). Put the main office in the urban county and have fewer staff in the smaller counties. “

“Potentially share CEEDS or combine CEED with program responsibilities (like what a FS would do)”

“The days of a physical presence in each county are over. You would be hard pressed to name another state agency that has an actual office in all 99 counties.”

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

“Consolidate or centralize support services (IT, communications, HR, accounting, administration).”

“Combine services centrally in ISU Extension. E.g. One financial unit managing grant finances.”

“Centralized communications unit is not effective. Place individuals within each program unit and eliminate duplicative administrative structure and costs.”

“Reduce unit size of marketing in communications.”

“Current press release production is antiquated and ignored by all but farm pages of dwindling number of newspapers.”

“As a campus-based faculty member, almost all of my support services come from the College. The College already has HR, IT people, and accounting people.”

Following this second grouping of ideas are a group of lower ranked suggestions: *revenue generation, eliminating programs/field specialists, developing online programs, focusing program, pay cuts, field specialist structure, partnering, and merging/modifying programs.*

Revenue generation suggestions include comments like:

“Develop innovative revenue generation. Identify services uniquely provided by Extension and charge for these.”

“Review what we do free.”

“Establish a baseline of program and services for “public good” (no charges) – then establish fee structure for “above the baseline” program and services.”

“No travel without mileage dollars.”

“Project-driven staffing based on grants (all field staff would have 20% of salary covered by contracts and grants).”

”Raise the 4-H program development fee and start charging Clover Kids.”

“Tap into St Fair profits for all the assistance, shows, audience we draw and provide for them.”

Eliminating programs/field specialists include suggestions like:

“Eliminate non-essential or overlapping program areas.”

“Eliminate obsolete services based on declining attendees or unwillingness of clients to pay a small fee.”

“Reduce or eliminate programs and services that are duplicated by other agencies. Be careful of areas with no competition other than private enterprise that may have a bias (conflict of interest).”

“Drop CIRAS.”

“Are there content areas we should drop? Ex: Housing, sheep, forestry, wildlife, Community Economic Development, Fish, small farm sustainability.”

“County level: stop providing all staff support for county fair (not education).”

“Consider doing away with international Extension outreach to focus on Iowa citizens.”

“A hard look should be given to youth field specialist positions as well as all non-customer service positions. Keeping front-line people in place is key.”

Developing online programs suggestions include items like:

“Increase fee and non-fee online programming.”

“Provide more programming through webcasts. Create an online library.”

“Online 4-H clubs.”

“Provide online help (live webcam) for clientele. Live diagnostics/help for bugs/diseases.”

“Use eXtension to cover non-core programming. For instance, programs that we do not have faculty expertise in (e.g. viticulture).”

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

“Stick to 3 national mission mandates for 4-H Youth. 1) SET; 2) Citizenship; 3) Healthy Lifestyles.”

“Prioritize programming issues – Are we expected to do the same with less or less with less? If less, we must determine what we don’t need.”

“To survive, Extension must put more focus on activities that support Iowa's economic growth.”

“We need to focus on core programs. We have branched into too many social areas and duplicating other services. Don’t just cut across the board, some programs need to be eliminated. That is what the legislature is telling us to do. The hard decisions need to be made, that is what administration and leadership is supposed to do.”

Ideas regarding *pay cuts* include items like:

“Enact pay cuts for all staff and reduce number of days per week the office is open.”

“Freeze all open positions.”

“Offer early retirement and then shuffle positions.”

“Offer furloughs.”

“Look at % cuts rather than total layoff of position. Either cut positions to .75 or .5 FTE.”

“Cap administrative salaries at reasonable level so we have passionate people not place holders.”

Field Specialist structure recommendations include:

“2 supervisors for field specialist is a luxury we need to go away from. Field specialists report to Program Director only.”

“Supervision consolidation within program units.”

“Dual County Directors/Field Specialists. Step up multi county programs.”

“Each field specialist serves the entire state with a high level of expertise in a focused area of specialty.”

Suggestions regarding *partners* include:

“Partnership: More partnerships without losing identity and losing our “unbiased” approach; look at impact of partnerships with groups such as DNR, IDALS, Public Health, Department of Education, Farm Bureau, crop groups, etc.”

“Offer services –with partnerships with others (ex. Hotline with Minn. Ext.) States.”

“Partner with Community Colleges. “House” field staff at CC and have teaching role to cover salary/benefits (split appointment).”

“Develop multistate Extension partnerships. E.g. share joint specialists or have each state have a different specialty.”

Merging/modifying programs include items like:

“Have CEPD become self-sustaining like ISU transportation services and conference services. No subsidization.”

“Merge 4-H with Families - gives more holistic look at youth.”

“Combine CIRAS and Communities programs.”

“Consider merging 4-H Youth Development into College of Human Sciences.”

The categories that have the fewest number of suggestions are listed below, together with a few representative comments. The 13 categories discussed above encompassed over 75% of all comments received; the 12 categories discussed below cover all remaining comments.

Assess need recommendations include:

“Assess programs based on current society and demographics.”

“Use focus groups (users/non users) to learn what programs Extension should offer.”

“Program review to analyze value to clients. (Develop ROI tool).”

Office look recommendations include:

“Embed Extension staff in existing non-profits and schools.”

“Create local presence at local libraries.”

“Centralize call center for all offices with Field Specialists having offices in homes.”

Efficiency – finance recommendations include:

“Accounting system (Cougar Mountain) is too complicated (increased cost in time and salary).”

“Do we spend money on bookkeeping just to transfer money from one pocket to another?”

“Cougar Mountain - rather than train every county - again 4 or 5 counties assign to one bookkeeper.”

Maintain/increase IT support recommendations include:

“May need to expand IT and Communications to support more alternative delivery.”

“Too much time is wasted by educators trying to do their own IT in the field.”

“Maintaining a strong focus on eXtension, and web programming are essential.”

Avoid duplication recommendations include:

“Determine priorities of citizens and then work with a variety of partners to determine who is going to do what to avoid duplication of services.”

“Eliminate duplication of programs across counties (e.g., FSQA).”

“Combine programs with other organizations, such as EFNEP with WIC program.”

Electronic pubs recommendations include:

“Put all publications on the web as an Adobe document so we can print & give to client.”

“Need more online publications and don’t send hard copies to all staff as many staff do not need/want a copy of all publications.”

Reduce central administration recommendations include:

“Evaluate administrative tiers – are we truly “lean”.”

“AEED’s have program focus as well as administration.”

“We should eliminate all assistant or associate administrative positions on campus.”

Outsource recommendations include:

“Investigate outsourcing payroll, HR, IT.”

“Explore contracting Univ. Conference Services – out-sourcing unless it is making money.”

“Outsource marketing and communication.”

Grant writing recommendations include:

“Provide state-wide leadership for grants (instead of everyone writing & administering the same grants at a county/area level).”

“Staff dedicated (more aggressive) to writing grants.”

The three ‘Other’ categories include general comments from the organization, operation, and support discussions and online comments that did not readily fall into the various categories or may not generate revenue savings. Comments include:

“Local positions and work are a priority relative to campus.”

“Redesign webpage- publications with a more Amazon.com look. Easier to pull resources.”

“Look at what other states and organizations are doing.”

“Sell the 4-H building.”

“Extension work should count for promotion and tenure.”

“Focus on providing information to Iowans rather than on preserving the existing Extension structure.”

As the new Extension model is developed, the ideas summarized in this document and the suggestions offered by County Extension Council members through their online survey are being considered. It has been important to this process to reflect on the opportunities identified by so many perspectives. As appropriate, these will be addressed by Extension administrators to enhance efficiencies of the Extension operation.