

Priorities for University Outreach in Children, Youth, Families and Communities

Abstract

In a survey of 950 residents of Michigan, respondents were asked about their preferences concerning receiving more information from Michigan State University, and the means by which they would prefer to receive to this information. Topics that were more frequently rated high priority than others were school violence, child abuse, treating people equally, preventing drug abuse, and affordable health care. Methods of information dissemination that were most frequently rated as "highly prefer" were public schools, Internet, television, Extension, pamphlets and printed matter.

Robert J. Griffore

Professor

griffore@pilot.msu.edu

Lillian A. Phenicé

Professor

Rosemary Walker

Professor

Marsha Carolan

Assistant Professor

Department of Family and Child Ecology
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan

Introduction

Universities that have an outreach mission need to plan in order to more effectively serve the needs of their increasingly diverse populations. According to Christensen and Wylie (1992) there is a need for new approaches to meet the mandate of Cooperative Extension. Additionally, new modes of information dissemination will be important as interest increases in addressing the needs of culturally diverse audiences (Woodson and Sgamma, 1997).

Ultimately, the goals of outreach are practical and action-oriented, such as planning community action (Peterson, 1995), building coalitions (Richardson, 1991), organizing community committees (Dyer & Williams, 1988), and organizing resources and leadership development (Raftery, 1993). However, it is important in the course of planning for these activities to conduct organized and systematic assessments of community needs (Etling & Maloney, 1995; Gessaman, 1993).

Knowing the public's priorities helps the university meet the needs. This information can guide university outreach program development, maintenance and evolution.

In the present study, the authors inquired about the kinds of information the public perceived as needed from a large land grant university. Additionally, they asked about ways in which the public prefers to have access to this information.

Method

Data were collected via a telephone survey of 950 residents of the state of Michigan. The sample was randomly selected and is considered to be representative of Michigan and its regions. Extensive demographic information was recorded as well. The statewide overall sampling error was $\pm 3.2\%$.

The survey was conducted by Michigan State University's Institute for Public Policy and Social Research (IPPSR) in the late summer and early fall of 1998. The present investigators, working with IPPSR, included in this interview items concerning children, youth, families, and communities in Michigan. Respondents were asked about the role of universities in their communities, and whether "having more information and help from Michigan State University with each of these is a high priority, a medium priority, or a low priority in your community."

Then they were asked, with respect to each of several methods of information dissemination, whether they highly preferred, somewhat preferred, or did not prefer, that Michigan State University use each method.

Results

Approximately 47% of the respondents were men and 53% women. Whites composed 84.3% of the sample; 12.4% were African-Americans; and 3.4% were other. About 58% of respondents' households had two adults; 15% had only one adult, and the remainder had three or more adults. More than half (55%) had no children 18 and under in the household, and 81% had no children under five years of age. Approximately 35% had less than a high school education or were high school graduates, and 64% had more than a high school education. Almost two-thirds (61.6%) were married; about 1 in 5 (21.4%) were single - never married; and 17% were characterized as "other" in marital status.

The items and their ratings are reported in Table 1.

Table 1
Summary of All Topic Ratings

Topic	Priority		
	High	Medium	Low
School violence	75.1	14.8	10.1
Child abuse	75.0	16.3	8.7
Treating people equally	74.2	19.9	5.9
Preventing drug use	74.0	18.3	7.7
Affordable health care	73.5	18.7	7.8
Preventing disease	72.3	22.1	5.6
Reducing domestic violence	70.9	21.5	7.6
Getting people off welfare	68.1	21.5	10.4
Reducing pollutants around children	68.0	21.5	10.5
Crime reduction	67.9	23.9	8.2
Improving air/water quality	64.5	25.2	10.3
Creating jobs	64.4	25.5	10.1
Problems of elderly	63.2	29.5	7.3
Life skills for youth	62.0	29.2	8.8

Child care providers	61.0	30.6	8.4
Parenting	55.4	31.0	13.6
Food and nutrition information	48.3	41.3	10.5
Money management	46.3	39.1	14.6
Consumer problems	31.6	48.6	19.8
Running a family business	23.0	54.7	22.2

Michigan citizens were most concerned with protecting children and youth from violence in schools and at home (75%). Treating people equally was also an issue about which citizens wanted more help and information from the university. Health concerns comprised most of the next highest priorities (70 to 74%). Citizens expressed a need for more information about affordable health care and prevention of drug abuse and domestic violence. Seven topics earned more than 70 percent high priority ratings, while only four earned less than 50 percent high priority ratings.

There is rather large variation in the degree to which respondents expressed a high preference for the six sources of information. Public schools were highly preferred most frequently and not preferred least frequently. Schools were preferred as the conduit for information (75%). In addition, a surprising proportion (nearly 50%) preferred the Internet with television (48%) and MSU Extension (47%) following closely behind. Information dissemination ratings are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Summary of Information Source Ratings

Information Source	Prefer	Highly Prefer	Somewhat Not Prefer
Public schools	74.9	17.5	7.6
Internet	49.8	38.2	12.0
Television	48.4	39.7	11.9
MSU Extension	47.1	41.9	11.0
Pamphlets and other printed matter	41.0	44.0	15.0
Radio	34.6	47.2	18.2

Preferences for information sources were examined in six MSU Extension (MSUE) regions: Upper Peninsula, Northern Lower Peninsula, West Central, Southwest, and Southeast Urban. Tables 3 - 7 show the preferences for the seven sources of information by region.

Table 3
Preferences for Radio by MSUE Region in Percent

Region	Highly Prefer	Not Prefer
Upper Peninsula	20.5	79.5
North L.P.	27.6	72.4
West Central	28.6	71.4
East Central	26.8	73.2
Southwest	31.7	68.3
Southeast	39.3	60.7

Table 4
Preferences for Television by MSUE Region in Percent

Region	Highly Prefer	Not Prefer
Upper Peninsula	45.6	54.4
North L.P.	47.3	52.7
West Central	33.4	66.6
East Central	48.4	51.6
Southwest	52.2	47.8
Southeast	51.3	48.7

Table 5
Preferences for Public Schools by MSUE Region in Percent

Region	Highly Prefer	Not Prefer
Upper Peninsula	70.7	29.3
North L.P.	73.6	26.4
West Central	67.0	33.0
East Central	67.0	33.0
Southwest	79.6	20.4
Southeast	77.2	22.8

Table 6
Preferences for Pamphlets and Other Printed Matter by MSUE Region

Region	Highly Prefer	Not Prefer
Upper Peninsula	55.3	44.7
North L.P.	42.3	57.7
West Central	38.4	61.6
East Central	44.1	55.9
Southwest	28.0	72.0
Southeast	43.5	56.5

Table 7
Preferences for Internet by MSUE Region

Region	Highly Prefer	Not Prefer
Upper Peninsula	68.2	31.8
North L.P.	39.9	60.1
West Central	35.5	64.5
East Central	45.1	54.9
Southwest	52.0	48.0
Southeast	52.9	47.1

There were some notable regional differences between "highly prefer" and "not highly prefer." For radio, the largest difference was in the Upper Peninsula; for television, in the West Central region; for schools, in the Southwest region; for pamphlets, in the Southwest; for the Internet, in the Upper Peninsula; and for MSU Extension, in the East Central region.

Discussion

These findings suggest critical aspects of public opinion concerning the role of a university in providing information about children, families, and communities. There are prevailing opinions that can serve as a basis for assessing and shaping university programs. In order to be responsive to opinions such as these, university programs need to be flexible. They must evolve in pace with the flow of public opinion. Indeed, the most effective adaptive strategies anticipate probable future modifications in public views. Such projections begin with current public opinion. They are shaped by short-term demographic, technological, and political projections. These perspectives are then examined with regard to probabilities of medium-range periodical and cyclical environmental events. For universities, the consequence of this strategic approach to planning is useful and adaptive.

It is interesting to note the differences in the extent to which respondents preferred certain modes of receiving information, and that these views vary across areas of the state. Given the findings concerning the popularity of the Internet in northern regions of Michigan, current interest in using the Internet to publish Extension documents and more effectively facilitate outreach (Tennessee, PonTell, Romine & Motheral, 1997) is supported. It may be useful to examine other regional preferences for similarly useful information.

References

Christensen, R.L., & Wylie, N. (1992). The New England Cooperative Extension consortium project: A synopsis. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Council on Interinstitutional Leadership (Charlotte, NC, October 2).

Dyer, D.A., & Williams, O.M. (1988). Developing effective and efficient local committees. Blacksburg: Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Cooperative Extension Service.

Etling, A., & Maloney, T. (1995). Needs assessment for Extension agents and other nonformal educators. University Park: Pennsylvania State University, Cooperative Extension Service.

Gessaman, P.H. (1993). Surveying community needs and priorities: A community needs assessment tool kit. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, Cooperative Extension Service.

Peterson, M. (1995). Harnessing the power of vision. Ten steps to creating a strategic vision and action plan for your community. Preparing your community for the 21st century series. Little Rock: University of Arkansas, Cooperative Extension Service.

Raftery, S.R. (1993). Community leadership development for sustainable Alabama communities. Auburn, AL: Auburn University, Cooperative Extension Service.

Richardson, J.G. (1991). Networking: Opportunities to build effective extension programs. Raleigh: North Carolina State University, Cooperative Extension Service.

Tennessee, D.J., PonTell, S., Romine, V., & Motheral, S.W. (1997). Opportunities for Cooperative Extension and local communities in the information age. *Journal of Extension*, 35(5). Available on-line at www.joe.org

Woodson, J., & Sgamma, L. (1997). The challenge of reaching a culturally diverse audience. *Journal of Extension*, 35(3). Available on-line at www.joe.org

Copyright© by *Extension Journal, Inc.* ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the *Journal Editorial Office*, joe-ed@joe.org.

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#)

© Copyright by Extension Journal, Inc. ISSN 1077-5315. [Copyright Policy](#)