



Book review

Land-Grant Universities and Extension into the 21st Century: Renegotiating or Abandoning a Social Contract. By George R. McDowell. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 2001, 214 pp.

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Introduction

We could have used George McDowell on the committee. McDowell's knowledge about the challenges facing the land-grant system would have earned him a spot, easily. The official name of the committee was *Strengthening Extension in the Colleges of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine*. Maybe you have been on a committee like this. It was charged with assessing the lethargies that got in the way of the important work of extension in our state. McDowell agrees that extension education is important work, and so do we. However, it is no secret that the extension system has run itself into several corners. What are less well known – and what comprises the hefty contribution made by McDowell's book – are the extent of the problems, their appearance along the continuum of local-to-national, and the degree to which the problems may be fatal to the system. Members of the committee were able to list nearly all of the problems during our first meeting. The items on our list, however, were inexact and turbo-charged with emotion. For this and other reasons, our committee launched a survey. But

if McDowell had been on the committee, we could have avoided the trouble of a survey. As far as we can tell, McDowell's book on contemporary dilemmas of the land-grant system got just about everything right.

It is worth mentioning right away, however, that this is, in many respects, an "insider's" book: those who have not grown up with the extension system, either developmentally (4-H) or professionally, may not connect to the personal stories about "the dinosaur." For example, we learned through using the book as a text in a graduate course on program development in agricultural and extension education that beginners and those unfamiliar with the extension system found chapters one and two to be illuminating, but the rest unmanageable. The increasing detail mattered to insiders; much less to newcomers. On the other hand, those readers who are between new-to-extension and belong-to-extension might benefit from reading McDowell, if only because the land-grant system functions as a model for both higher education and non-formal education worldwide. It is an important topic – one worth writing yet another book about.

To this end, McDowell provides a thorough analysis of the components of the land-grant system, updated in important ways. The bonus of the book is the "lived" portrait of a system that has too often attracted attention for what it was meant to be rather than for what it has become. Students and scholars of organizations may also appreciate the clarity with which McDowell charts dysfunctions up and down the organizational hierarchy. The portrait is near to a systems analysis, pointing out "governing rules" that frustrate change, the limited awareness and defensiveness of players in the system, and other concepts that are elucidated by organizational theorists such as Argyris and Schön (1996).

The book offers the reader several additional gifts: a pointed, vigorous writing style; fresh theoretical analyses; and confident analyses of the political economy that underlies the extension system. The author is also willing to "name names," which is helpful and a lot of fun (more so for those who know the names, we suppose). There is none of the dutiful acknowledgment of generic groups of people who remain unnamed due to confidentiality protocols

of the social scientist. Instead, McDowell lists the names of “132 people from around the country” with whom he talked as part of his research, and makes specific reference to them (and others) throughout the book. Further, McDowell does not pretend to be a detached scholar, and he does not permit anyone else to remain detached, either. McDowell introduces us to his younger self, relaying a personal history of joys and frustrations with the extension system, including promotion and tenure battles, publication wars, and the rise and fall of myriad reforms. The decision to talk about specific people and places made for fast-paced, informative reading. Possibly, it also has made McDowell less welcome into the hallways of particular land-grant universities – this we can only guess.

McDowell also writes wonderful, meaningful stories. Sections of the book are nearly ethnographic. The story about the Humanities Extension / Publications Program at North Carolina State University brings home the failures of the system in Chapter 8. McDowell calls the alleged lack of cooperation around this unusual extension program “particularly tragic.” We recognized the pattern and agree that it is achingly common. Illumination serves both to personalize and to put into context (with all of its attendant complexity) the particular problem or issue that McDowell addresses at the time. The stories also provided an opportunity to connect dysfunctions and issues to our own experience. The personal touch seems to encourage investment of the reader. This effect is marvelous and we found the book difficult to put down. This was also true for the more experienced hands that were enrolled in our graduate class.

Focus on contradictions

What is different about the book is its ability to side step both scathing critique and romantic defense. Instead, the text travels between criticism and fealty buoyed by an enduring love of extension. McDowell accomplishes the complex tone by convincing the reader that extensionists live contradictory lives. These lives are noble and sometimes effective, yet systematically unresponsive to contemporary needs. The contradictions, if one has been part of the system, can be quite bruising. In his drive to stay complex, McDowell avoids explaining the history of the land-grant system as a coherent tidal wave of democratic educational reform. This historical-philosophical thread has been pursued in texts since the land-grant system’s founding, and has been the focus of substantial theoretical works by contemporary extension scholar Scott Peters (1999).

McDowell acknowledges the history of the system as part of the evolution of democratic forms, but surrounds the tale with economic realities of higher education, particularly the political economy of the research university. McDowell is convincing in these sections. He explains the convergence of economic data with political trends, both democratic and otherwise. The result is a system that talks local control but is lashed to the national agendas of general farm organizations, notably, the American Farm Bureau and the agricultural industry. McDowell’s de-romanticizing of the democratic agenda of the land-grant system is evident in statements such as, “The land-grant model was designed principally as a means to keeping the academic scientists’ feet to the fire with respect to the type of research that was to be accomplished” [break] “not its administrative combining of teaching, research, and extension” (p. 51).

There are additional benefits of reading a book by an agricultural economist. McDowell conjoins the system’s problems with that of the unprecedented drop in numbers of farmers in the US in a way that is informed rather than simplistic. Many of us are tired of hearing that such-and-such phenomenon is explained by the (near-mythic) statistic: *2% of the population remains in farming*. McDowell discusses why, in particular, this pinches the identity crisis of the land-grant system. McDowell points out the contradiction of the firmness with which the land-grant system rallies to the cause of production agriculture, often in the face of pressing needs on local as well as national levels. McDowell calls the rally ‘round agricultural issues “hostage taking” by farm organizations. He proposes that people in the system act out of fear rather than loyalty when they support the agricultural agenda over and above competing agendas, such as youth development in urban or rural areas. These sections are vivid and well done. They implicate everyone nearly equally – local boards and staff, faculty and deans, government officials in Washington. McDowell portrays extension as a system that holds no desire to abandon farming (and should support agriculture), but is stifled when it attempts to address systemic problems farmers face because it is hamstrung by the political clout wielded by commodity groups. McDowell convinces us that the very system held hostage by these groups fails to serve its hostage takers all that well in the end. If even part of this argument holds, it is troubling.

McDowell’s presentation on the structure of the land-grant system is also distinct. In one sense, McDowell’s text is similar to other detailed and pragmatic texts that focus on the complexities of implementation and the tangle of bureaucracy. For example, as do other texts, McDowell explains the Smith-Lever

Act of 1914, the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862, and the important adjustments in 1890 and 1994 that help the system to better serve African Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics through the institutions that are closely aligned with these constituents. McDowell also explains the simultaneous and dispersed character of the land-grant innovation, and how it was accomplished in stages through different political thrusts. It is well known, for example, that many universities claim to be the first land-grant college, or claim they started the extension system. Such “truths” are proclaimed on plaques and in promotional literature, including on our campus. McDowell provides sufficient detail to appreciate how “everyone first” can be so, and how it is something to be celebrated. This type of structural explanation is exemplified by texts produced by Canadian extension scholar Don Blackburn (1994). However, Blackburn-style texts are intended to gain the reader a foothold so that she may slide into productive service. McDowell is less sure that one can render productive service under current conditions.

Public service

McDowell’s clearest and most useful theoretical piece for practitioners, scholars, and students is on judging the public response to public service aspects of the land-grant system (pp. 23–24). McDowell explains that a program must first generate a “positive net benefit to the client” (which does not always occur). Then, the “attribution condition” states that “most of the net benefits . . . must be attributed to the university.” McDowell is able to suggest how the model is problematic for universities and extension, particularly when there is a vague understanding of university projects and partnerships. McDowell also dwells on the issue of collecting “political capital” – the stuff that makes people support the university in times of strife and unrest. However, McDowell argues that for stakeholders, “acting politically for the university” must not cost more than the benefit of the service. Current trends, such as asking for “cost recovery” for particular extension and university services, forgo the option of collecting political capital later. The application of the theory is tidy and useful. It is followed by compelling arguments for following the model, rather than disregarding it, as McDowell suggests occurs more frequently.

More extension woes

McDowell’s characterization of the problems of the extension system is apparently quite distressing for

extension staff, or at least it is for many that we know personally. At the same time, quite a few applaud McDowell’s exacting portrait. The extension system is often called the “outreach arm” of the land-grant system, but it is much more than that. Located in nearly every county in every state, commonwealth, and protectorate, the extension system sees itself as the veritable heart and soul of the land-grant endeavor. We will not dispute this claim. Extension’s enviable local presence has enabled scores of extension educators to do more than their already-ambitious agenda implies, mainly in technical areas, but also in community and youth development. Leaders among Iowa State University extension field staff and directors invited McDowell to speak to them in Des Moines in August 2001. McDowell’s book was a bit of an underground best seller in this group. McDowell, in person, was passionate, articulate, and focused. The dialogue between him and the extensionists was, at times, painful. McDowell would say something like, “We know more about the calves than the kids.” [In the book it says, “Notwithstanding all the kids in America who have been taught to raise calves and pets of all kinds, extension still knows more about the calves than the kids or the problems of kids in the society” (p. 117). An extension educator exclaimed that this was untrue and unfair. Extension really did care about kids, she said. McDowell looked her in the eye and said, “I didn’t say we *care more* about the calves than kids. I said we *know more* about the calves than the kids.” His plea is for more research support for non agricultural endeavors, such as the Expanded Food and Nutrition for Low Income Families (EFNEP) program; programs that serve youth, like the Children, Youth and Families at Risk program; and, of course, 4-H. Tables of economic data provide a foundation for these claims, and McDowell is forceful in this regard. He calls the under-funded research areas (community development, 4-H and other people-oriented foci of the land-grant colleges) “emblematic” of the problem of the land-grant system’s failure to change with the times. In turn, the failure to stay current becomes a failure with respect to its mission because the system is, in part, intended to serve the needs of society.

McDowell’s argument reads like a plea for the land grant system to invest its resources (specifically, research dollars) in issues for which the democratic populace has few resources and even fewer answers. His vision appears to be for the land grant system to escape the bonds of lethargy and act courageously to keep the land grant colleges and universities as *people’s* colleges and universities. To this end, his book is not so much of an indictment of national farm organizations and industry as it is a painful admission

of a parent whose child has wandered astray. He has no desire to give the child up for adoption; rather, he would like nothing better than for the child to find "itself" amidst the frenetic, chaotic, and oftentimes competing activities and pressures of life in a democratic society. It is here that we must levy our most substantive charge: the book's trek toward its conclusions and recommendations is uneven, and nearly falters at the end. In fact, McDowell's refusal to recommend a coherent set of solutions results in an unfinished conclusion that rails against deans of colleges of agriculture, but goes no further. The effect is partly a consequence of McDowell's refusal to install reforms of his own. We are not suggesting that McDowell offer recommendations when there are none to offer, but a more graceful way to end the book would have been preferred by the two reviewers who were so taken with the prior three-quarters of the text. It is also clear to us that if this is our only complaint, then the book was worth the purchase price even before it was reprinted in soft cover. Bravo, George. Now, about membership on that committee

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