

New MSUE Director Brings Fresh Perspectives to the Program

Tom Coon is accustomed to navigating rivers and streams – a skill he is undoubtedly relying upon since becoming the MSU Extension (MSUE) director March 1.

Coon is charting a course for an educational system facing budget restraints and a changing population base. His challenge is to continue to meet the needs of communities throughout the state amidst tight budgets at all levels. The answer to the challenges may be realized in strengthening program areas and forming partnerships to help revitalize and maintain programs.

Coon, who has been at MSU since the late 1980s, is relatively new to the Extension program. As a faculty member in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, he focused on teaching and research. Coon believes his passion for teaching will be an asset in his new leadership position and that his lack of institutional knowledge about MSUE will give him the freedom to make changes.

“Moving into Extension has been something new for me, yet it still builds on my interest in teaching,” Coon says. “I think my lack of Extension experience is an advantage, but I do have a lot to learn. Over the last four months, I have been trying to run my own crash course on Extension. I have been meeting with a number of organizations and connecting with people within Extension, and those that care about Extension and understand what it means to them.”

MSUE, one of the cornerstone programs of Michigan’s land-grant university, has faced



pressure from the Governor, who at one time proposed removing all state funding for the program. Though MSUE and the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station have been spared from elimination, they have suffered

serious budget cuts. These financial restraints have led to close examination of the program and its offerings.

Maintaining Extension’s Key Strengths

Coon sees two key strengths in the current MSUE system. The first is Extension’s presence in all Michigan 83 counties, making Extension a unique asset in the state’s investment in higher education. The second is that MSUE programs are based on sound scholarship derived from university-generated scientific knowledge.

“Extension programs are directed at what the needs are in the communities,” Coon says. “We take an objective look at what the needs are and how those needs can be met and work to provide information to people to help them make their decision on how they want to use the information. We don’t tell them what decision to make - we simply spell out the options.”

Underneath the key strengths is a network of people. Coon describes Extension as a people organization: people serving people. There are more than 1,000 people in the organization facing the

constant challenges of determining the needs of the communities and developing innovative ways of delivering information.

Meeting New Challenges

While the breadth of Extension-serving every county- is a key strength, it also creates many challenges. MSUE has five core program areas: community and economic development, profitable agriculture, strong families, youth programs and responsible natural resource use, and addressing each of these areas in every county is a tremendous challenge.

“The challenge is how do we make sure we have sufficient expertise in all areas to really be the resource we need to be?” Coon says. “At times we find ourselves being the resource and at times we need to identify who else might be the resource. So we can be either the educator or the facilitator.”

Judging the right time to be the facilitator rather than the educator will be an integral part of MSUE under Coon’s leadership. With limited resources, Coon understands that forming partnerships and reaching out to other organizations will be essential to Extension’s future.

“The nature of the organization is to identify a need and then use our resources to develop and deliver the information at no cost to the user,” Coon states. “In some cases that may still be appropriate, but in a lot of other cases we need to be able to say that another organization or university has the expertise and we need to bring them to the table.”

Like MSUE, the community colleges around the state are also

working throughout the state to meet local needs. The similarity between the two, Coon believes, would make a worthy infrastructure for delivering information. Coon hopes to develop working partnerships with community colleges to help meet MSUE objectives.

“From an MSU perspective, partnering with community colleges can help develop prospective students who can transfer into MSU programs,” Coon says. “But more importantly, from the land-grant perspective, community colleges can help us achieve our mission. I like to say we have a responsibility to be stewards of the land-grant mission, but we don’t own it, so that means bringing other partners to the table.”

Profitable Agriculture Programs

Profitable production agriculture was the foundation of the MSUE system when it began and it remains a core program area. As it is with all Extension programs, the development and delivery of agriculture information is changing. Many of the changes taking place are a result of changes within the industry. Consolidation and integration within agriculture require changing the way the industry is served.

“Where the large-scale industry (like swine) is concentrating and vertically integrating, we need to look at different ways of delivering information and partnering with producers to provide the information they need,” Coon explains. “It is also fair at that point to say to the industry, ‘Some of this information is free and for some it may be appropriate for the user to pay for it,’ like they would pay a consultant or a vet.”

While the dairy industry is not as integrated as the swine indus-

try, Coon believes it will continue to polarize at the ends with not as many in the middle. The dramatic division in size will require two types of programs within the same industry depending on the size of the operation.

“It is not our place to say you shouldn’t be operating on a small or a large scale, we are here to serve whoever is operating and provide information in a way that they can use it and the kind of information they need,” Coon says.

Coon met with Extension’s Dairy Area of Expertise team recently to discuss its priorities. He believes team members are working effectively at integrating the campus specialists with the educators in the field. He encouraged them to continue to look into the future when developing their strategic plans. “We need to be strategic- we need to have experts here at MSU and talking with those from other universities and from the dairy industry about what they see as future demands. We need to have a sense of where the industry is going, so we can be prepared to have the information and the best options for delivering information when the need arises,” Coon says.

The majority of MSUE funding comes from state and local sources. This reliance on state funding leaves the program vulnerable to budget cuts and limits the potential for income increases. MSUE has always received grants and that source accounts for about 12-16 percent of the total budget. Coon believes that amount needs to double. A new fee structure is being implemented to cover the costs of individual programs.

“The policy says if we are doing a program that serves the common good, those are already paid for by public funds,” Coon explains. “However, if we develop a program that is very targeted to an individual producer’s needs, and they receive a clear individual

benefit, then it makes sense for them to pay extra for that program.”

Bringing 4-H programs to all communities

MSUE 4-H programs are highly valued at the county level, the source for more than half of 4-H funding (55 percent). Some of the principles taught through 4-H – leadership and entrepreneurial skills – align with the characteristics outlined in the Cherry Commission Report on Higher Education. Others, including teamwork, responsibility and planning, enable young people to become successful adults. The challenge becomes stretching the program to reach more of the urban population.

“We know that 4-H programs can be extremely helpful in urban areas,” Coon says. “We are looking at after-school programs, not necessarily a traditional club format, but curricular activities made available to young people to help them develop the skills that 4-H helps build.”

Industry Input

As Coon navigates a course for the MSUE system in the 21st century he is looking for input from industry and community members. A comprehensive survey will be distributed later this year asking for opinions about programming offered by MSUE and the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station. County office staffs will also ask citizens for input on meeting local needs.

Coon is also spending a great deal of time meeting with organizations with an interest in MSUE programs. He welcomes the comments and ideas of those interested in the future of MSUE.