

Valuing Extension Programming at the County Level

Abstract

Local governments must make difficult choices to provide funding for essential services. Determining where Extension programming fits in the continuum of services provided by local governments can be a challenge. We assessed the value Extension provides to a community by using a randomized survey and focus group interviews in a rural Washington county. The survey response rate was greater than 50%, and we found no nonresponder bias. The county's residents indicated that they think Extension adds value to the community, that they are willing to pay for Extension services, and that they endorse the use of public dollars to support Extension.

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, university Extension funding has relied heavily on local (within-state) sources (Wang, 2014). In Washington State, county Extension offices typically rely on funding from county governments for a large portion of their budgets. The recent period of general economic decline forced local governments to cut expenses and shift revenues to balance their budgets (Perlman & Benton, 2012). In Washington, this situation has led to intense competition for discretionary funding from county governments. County Extension directors are under increasing pressure to justify the value of Extension programming as counties try to eliminate or greatly reduce funding for perceived nonessential services. Extension educational programming is being pitted against other important services provided by county governments. By demonstrating the value that local residents place on Extension education and residents' willingness to pay for Extension services, Extension can help local elected officials appreciate the benefit of this type of programming to the community.

Others have looked at the value of individual programs, such as 4-H (Campbell, Trzesniewski, Nathaniel, Enfield, & Erbstein, 2013; Peterson, Baker, Leatherman, Newman, & Miske, 2012),

pesticide education (Young & Ramsay, 2011), and master gardener programming (Schrock, Meyer, Ascher, & Snyder, 2000). County Extension programs are often dependent on one another to meet both logistical needs and programming needs. In the study reported here, we used a mixed methodology approach to determine the collective value of Extension programming to a relatively small, rural community in western Washington State. Using a randomized mail survey and focus group interviews, we explored (a) the value residents place on having an Extension office in their community, (b) the benefit of using public funds to support a local Extension office, and (c) the collective value that Extension programming provides to a community.

The setting for the study reported here was Island County, a rural community located approximately 20 miles northwest of Seattle, Washington. A large number of retirees live in Island County, with the percentage of those over age 65 exceeding those under age 18 (20.3% and 19.6%, respectively). Agriculture here has changed dramatically in the past 20 years, with most farms getting smaller and now doing some level of direct marketing. Master gardener, 4-H, small farm, environmental, and natural resource programming are hallmarks of Washington State University (WSU) Extension endeavors in Island County. However, county financial support for WSU Extension has decreased in recent years, in line with declining federal and state funding for Extension services throughout the United States (Shields, 2013).

Methods

Mixed Methods

Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007) reported on the many definitions of mixed methods used in the literature. In the study discussed here, we followed a process used by many to collect, analyze, and combine quantitative and qualitative empirical data in a single study or a series of studies (Denzin, 2012). Specifically, we integrated a quantitative random survey distributed to two subsamples with qualitative focus group interviews. With the survey, we followed the tailored design method (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014) to collect data on how residents of Island County value Extension programs. We conducted the focus group interviews after the survey results were analyzed, with the aim of corroborating findings or exploring in greater depth the relationships from the quantitative analysis, as suggested by Wolff, Knodel, and Sittitrai (1993).

Survey Design

The survey instrument comprised 53 questions, and we used willingness-to-pay and Likert scale valuation questions to determine the value Island County residents place on WSU Extension programming. The instrument was validated with assistance from academic survey specialists, Extension faculty, and local community leaders. The reliability was measured by using Cronbach's alpha (Santos, 1999) on the scale, yes and no, and willingness-to-pay questions for all returned questionnaires. The value of alpha was 0.9, within the acceptable range of 0.7 to 0.95 (Kline, 2013; Thompson & Lamble, 2013).

Two subsamples were surveyed. First, 547 names were selected from a list of 3,135 Island County residents having a previous association with WSU. Second, 616 households were selected from a list

of 27,775 residences listed by the Island County assessor's office as residential properties having an improvement value of \$10,000 or more. These two subsamples were designated as the WSU list (WL) subsample and the general population (GP) subsample, respectively. Correspondence with selectees was addressed to the residents of a given address, not to the property owners. After correcting for bad addresses, the WL sample size was 503, and the GP sample size was 478.

To further randomize the participants, we asked that the person in the household who was over 18 and had had the most recent birthday complete the survey. The response rates were 58.25% (293/503) from the WL subsample and 41.42% (198/478) from the GP subsample. The overall response rate for both surveys was 50.5%. Comparisons were made within each subsample between respondents who completed and returned the survey during the first half of the study period and those who completed and returned the survey during the last half of the study period. No significant difference was found between the early and late responders in either subsample, thus allowing validation for generalizing to the entire population of Island County (Lindner, Murphy, & Briers, 2001; Miller & Smith, 1983).

Focus Group Interviews

Focus groups were conducted as prescribed by Krueger and Casey (2014). Participants were selected on the basis of information from program coordinators, volunteers, and business and community leaders, who provided names of individuals representing a broad spectrum of the community. The names were categorized into pools representing three distinct geographical regions of the county. From each of the three pools of 40 to 50 names, 20 names were randomly drawn, and those people were contacted. Ultimately, nine to 12 individuals participated in each focus group. The group interviews were conducted in private meeting rooms at local restaurants. The focus group participants were given a 20-minute summary of the survey results and served a catered meal before the focus group interviews. Each group was asked by a facilitator the same series of eight questions, outlined in Table 1. The focus group interviews lasted 70–90 min and were recorded, transcribed, and coded using NVivo software. The same researcher coded comments into 22 unique nodes.

Table 1.
Focus Group Interview Questions

1	Please introduce yourself by telling us your name, where you live, how long you have lived here, and what experience you have with University Extension.
2	What role do you think University Extension should play within local communities?
3	According to our survey, 91% of the residents of Island County feel having a WSU Extension office is of value to this community and 87% feel that use of public funds to support WSU Extension in Island County is appropriate. Can you help us understand this strong support for WSU in this community?

4	What other ways should WSU pursue to financially support Extension outreach programming in Island County?
5	What are some of the ways that demonstrate the value of WSU Extension to you and this community?
6	If WSU Extension did not have an office in Island County, do you think private firms or organizations would deliver similar services? If yes, would they do so at reasonable prices?
7	Of the programs we outlined in our introduction, which do you feel is the most and the least important for Island County?
8	What are some of the things that WSU Extension should do to better serve Island County residents?

Results

Survey Questions and Outcomes

There were significant differences between the two groups surveyed; however, patterns tended to go in the same directions for both groups. For example, in both the WL and the GP subsamples, individuals were most familiar with the Master Gardener program (88.9% and 73.3%), whereas they were least familiar with the Livestock Advisors and Waste Wise programs (21.2% and 13.4%). It is important to acknowledge that willingness to pay represents a behavioral intent and might not necessarily lead to actual behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Thus, it is critical to know how many respondents were at least familiar with Extension programs even if they did not use any specific services offered by WSU Extension. The familiarity questions were at the beginning of the survey. Overall, 96.96% of the WL subsample and 90.26% of the GP subsample were aware of at least one of the specific programs offered by WSU Extension. Questions later in the survey asked specifically about the importance and value of having a WSU Extension office in Island County and the appropriateness of using public funds to support Extension (see Figures 1, 2, and 3).

Figure 1.

Importance of WSU Extension Office

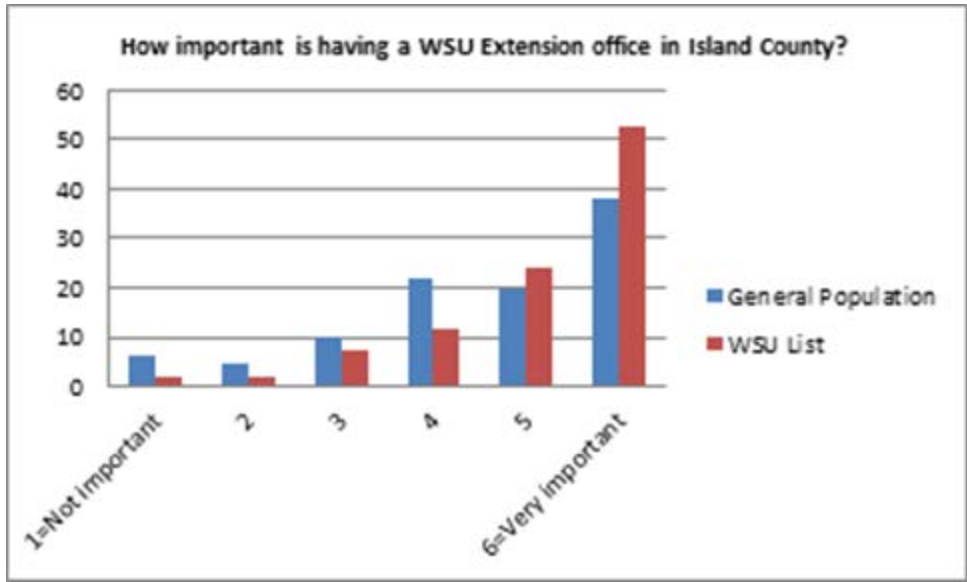


Figure 2.

Value of WSU Extension Office in Island County

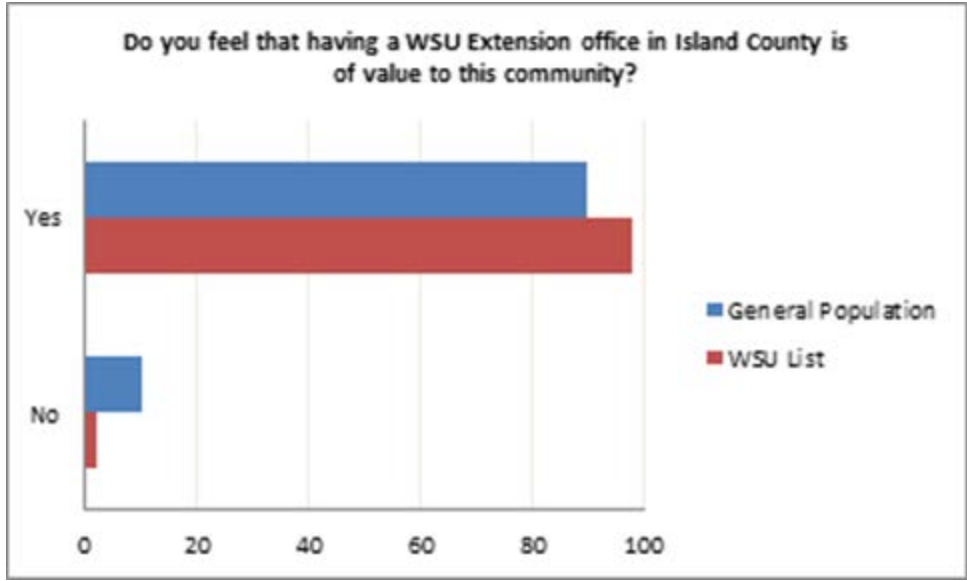


Figure 3.

Appropriateness of Using Public Dollars to Support WSU Extension

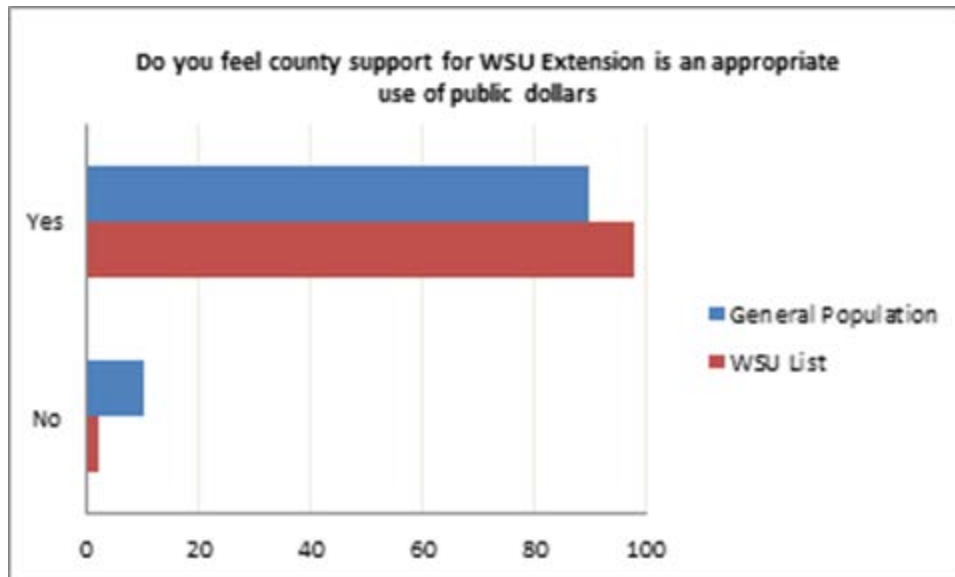
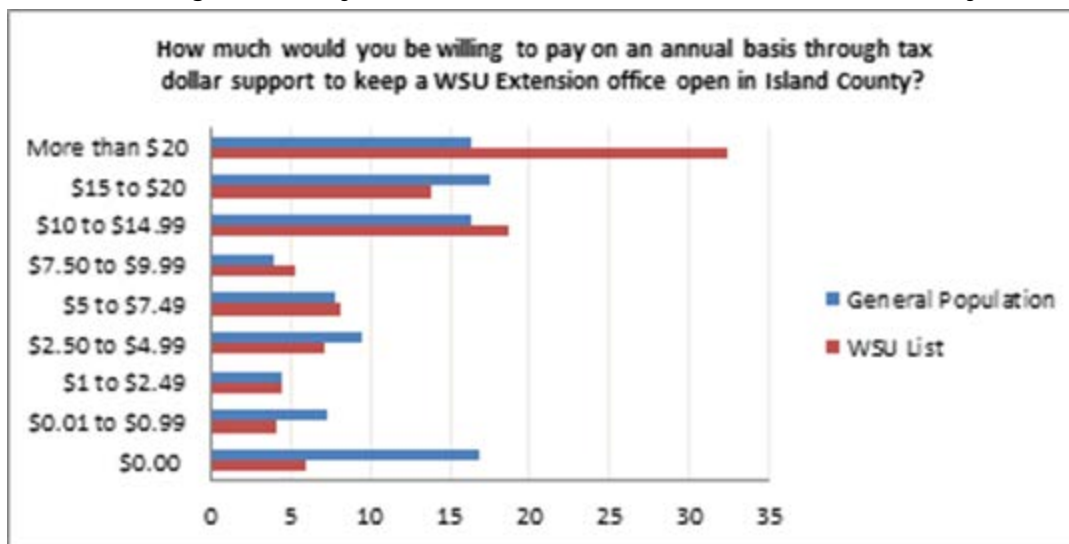


Figure 4 shows data for how much respondents would be willing to pay annually through tax dollar support to keep a WSU Extension office in Island County. Respondents were given several choices, ranging from "\$0" to "More than \$20." In the GP subsample, 16.8% of respondents chose "\$0," 33.7% indicated that they would be willing to pay an amount between \$10 and \$20, and 16.3% chose "More than \$20." In the WL subsample, about 6% of respondents chose "\$0," 32.5% indicated that they would be willing to pay an amount between \$10 and \$20, and 32.5% chose "More than \$20."

Figure 4.

Willingness to Pay to Have WSU Extension Office in Island County



Finally, we asked several questions about residents' willingness to pay for Extension services. The methodology we used is common in eliciting public opinion regarding specific goods or services, including Extension programs (Blaine, Lichtkoppler, & Stanbro, 2003; Roe, Haab, & Sohngen, 2004; Whitehead, Hoban, & Clifford, 2001). Respondents were asked to choose \$0, \$2.50, \$5, \$7.50, or \$10 or to write their own price. WSU Extension also hosts various workshops annually, and we asked how much respondents would be willing to pay to attend these workshops. In Table 2, we

present data showing that the WL subsample individuals were more willing to pay for all Extension programs and services than the GP subsample individuals. Both groups valued the 4-H Youth Development and Master Gardener programs more highly than other programs.

Table 2.
Willingness to Pay for Specific Services

Survey Question	Measurement Scale	Mean (Standard Deviation)	
		General Population	WSU List
WSU Extension Workshops			
How much would you be willing to pay to attend these one-day workshops?	Either choose between \$20, \$30, \$40, \$50, \$60, or write own price		
Whidbey Garden Workshop		\$16.92 (\$12.13) 19.85% said '\$0' 61.07% said '\$20' or more	\$24.19 (\$14.50) 11.62% said '\$0' 77.78% said '\$20' or more
Sound Waters (SW) one-day environmental workshop		\$16.46 (\$13.02) 25.38% said '\$0' 57.69% said '\$20' or more	\$24.68 (\$14.99) 11.65% said '\$0' 79.13% said '\$20' or more
4-H Youth Development			
How much would you be willing to pay on an annual basis to maintain the 4-H/Youth Development program in Island County?	Either choose between \$0, \$2.50, \$5, \$7.50, \$10, or write own price	\$7.65 (\$10.87) 19.14% said '\$0' 65.43% said '\$5' or more	\$8.55 (\$12.84) 13.62% said '\$0' 85.53% said '\$5' or more
Gardening			
How much would you be willing to pay on an annual basis to maintain the following WSU Extension programs in Island County to address landscaping needs and services?	Either choose between \$0, \$2.50, \$5, \$7.50, \$10, or		

	write own price		
Forest Stewards		\$4.20 (\$4.09) 28.79% said '\$0' 45.45% said '\$5' or more	\$5.70 (\$5.56) 15.32% said '\$0' 62.10% said '\$5' or more
Master Gardeners		\$5.10 (\$4.16) 20.00% said '\$0' 53.33% said '\$5' or more	\$6.72 (\$7.40) 10.81% said '\$0' 69.59% said '\$5' or more
Waste Wise		\$4.13 (\$4.08) 28.57% said '\$0' 45.59% said '\$5' or more	\$5.36 (\$3.89) 16.67% said '\$0' 62.70% said '\$5' or more
How much would you be willing to pay on an annual basis to keep the Master Gardener (MG) demonstration site at Greenbank Farm open to the public?	Either choose between \$0, \$2.50, \$5, \$7.50, \$10, or write own price	\$3.66 (\$4.52) 34.48% said '\$0' 35.63% said '\$5' or more	\$4.22 (\$5.21) 29.52% said '\$0' 44.58% said '\$5' or more
How much would you be willing to pay on an annual basis to keep and maintain the Master Gardener program in Island County?	Either choose between \$0, \$2.50, \$5, \$7.50, \$10, or write own price	\$6.04 (\$6.50) 17.78% said '\$0' 59.20% said '\$5' or more	\$6.96 (\$7.35) 12.09% said '\$0' 67.40% said '\$5' or more
Forestry/Agriculture			
How much would you be willing to pay on an annual basis for an agricultural educational program in Island County?	Either choose between \$0, \$2.50, \$5, \$7.50, \$10, or write own price	\$4.48 (\$7.26) 32.52% said '\$0' 40.49% said '\$5' or more	\$4.86 (\$6.86) 28.87% said '\$0' 49.37% said '\$5' or more
How much would you be willing to pay on an annual basis to have the following WSU Extension environmental programs in Island County?	Either choose between \$0, \$2.50, \$5, \$7.50, \$10, or write own price		
Beach Watchers		\$4.02 (\$5.04) 26.09% said	\$5.82 (\$8.79) 20.33% said

		'\$0' 41.61% said '\$5' or more	'\$0' 57.72% said '\$5' or more
Forest Stewards		\$3.55 (\$3.69) 31.17% said '\$0' 39.61% said '\$5' or more	\$4.78 (\$5.92) 25.44% said '\$0' 50.00% said '\$5' or more
Shore Stewards		\$3.59 (\$3.89) 31.61% said '\$0' 39.35% said '\$5' or more	\$4.90 (\$5.87) 24.05% said '\$0' 51.90% said '\$5' or more
Waste Wise		\$3.34 (\$3.49) 33.99% said '\$0' 37.91% said '\$5' or more	\$5.02 (\$6.73) 26.55% said '\$0' 49.56% said '\$5' or more
<i>Tourism</i>			
How much would you be willing to pay on an annual basis to keep the Admiralty Head Lighthouse (AHL) open to the public?	Either choose between \$0, \$2.50, \$5, \$7.50, \$10, or write own price	\$3.54 (\$4.82) 31.21% said '\$0' 34.68% said '\$5' or more	\$4.40 (\$7.64) 28.19% said '\$0' 40.15% said '\$5' or more

Focus Group Interviews

Focus group interviews revealed several salient themes that provide insight into the quantitative data from the survey. The most striking and recurring theme that emerged from the interviews was overwhelming support for a direct association with a university. Focus group participants readily acknowledged the value of having a university-based educational program at the local level. Participants were supportive of the movement to online access for training programs, but not in lieu of face-to-face local programming that augments the online training. This view reflects the strong desire for the association with the university to be as local as possible. The participants strongly associated with the need for university-based education for youth development and continuing education of adults. There was also strong support continuation of a relationship with the university through volunteering opportunities that allow people to use and implement the education they have received. The importance of university Extension in community development emerged as a very strong theme. Although this view may be unique to Island County and the large number of people who relocate for retirement or as part of military deployment at Whidbey Naval Air Station, focus group participants indicated that many new residents sign up for Extension programs and volunteer

opportunities to meet new people and become part of the community.

Most focus group participants felt that no other governmental entity or business could replace Extension programming with programming having the credibility that people associate with the university. However, some of the business participants noted that they often answer questions similar to those addressed by county Extension offices but that businesses need to sell product to provide this type of service.

Interestingly, the strong association with having a university at the local level did not extend to Extension. This disconnection was especially true with the public at large, but even participants who were active in Extension programming did not fully understand the role of university Extension. Discussions with the focus group participants strongly suggested that the support we saw in the survey results is associated with the university. They also suggested that many people have heard of such programs as Master Gardeners, 4-H, or Beach Watchers but do not necessarily associate these programs with WSU Extension. Recurring themes from the focus group interviews suggest the need to promote Extension programming and the association of these programs with the university.

Conclusion

Both quantitative and qualitative data showed strong support for a locally based association with a university system. This support included residents' willingness to pay for various programs and services, even when they had no direct involvement with Extension. The importance and value residents placed on individual programs varied, but the collective support for a university office in the county was strong. The evidence suggested that this support is associated with a direct local connection to university programming and recognition that such an association adds value to a community as a whole. Qualitative data suggested that this support would weaken without a direct local connection.

Interestingly, support for association with a university system did not necessarily translate to support for "Extension." There appeared to be confusion about what university Extension is and how it relates to the university. The residents of Island County appeared to associate more with WSU than with WSU Extension. Extension should place a stronger emphasis on increasing awareness of the roles Extension plays in providing local programming and of the direct connection to the university. Local leadership and program participants may understand that 4-H or the Master Gardeners program are directly associated with the county Extension office, but the public at large may not understand this relationship. Greater and more effective use of university branding is important. Emphasis on the direct connection with a land-grant university should lead to increased support for Extension programming at the local level. Such emphasis also should assist in development of a strong argument that county Extension is an essential service and an appropriate use of public dollars for both economic development and quality of life.

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