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[Read Jennifer Armstrong and Mitch Menchaca's article, "Coming of Age: Access and Equity in American Arts."](#)

Culture in Agriculture: The Cooperative Extension Service as an Alternative Rural Arts Model

Savannah Barrett

The arts programs of the Cooperative Extension Service (Extension Service) had a significant role in the development of the American community arts field. Considering the underinvestment of both public and private philanthropy in rural cultural programming (some studies estimate as little as 1% investment (1)) and the flexible, diversified funding structures of Extension Service programs, the creation of arts programs within the Cooperative Extension Service has proven to be a viable alternative for the development of cultural programming in small communities (Cohen & Barkhamer, 2004; Wyant, 2012). Based on findings in "[The Community Arts Programs of the Cooperative Extension Service: Comparative Study of Arts Initiatives in Kentucky and Wisconsin](#)" (2013), I concluded that the adaptable funding and organizational structure of the localized Extension Service model paired with the accessibility of university faculty and resources made them viable as replicable programs. As such, these programs are valuable models for other states and communities to consider.

That previous study aimed to inform rural arts practitioners, community arts academics, and policy makers regarding the limitations of existing resource investment in rural areas and need for additional rural arts organizational models. The arts programs of the Extension Service were evaluated as model programs in this study because their networked federal, state, and county funding model offers an alternative to the unreliable nonprofit arts model (2). Utilizing the extensive social capital and financial resources of the Extension Service offers an opportunity for rural arts programs that counties can afford and with which their citizenry are often comfortable engaging. Therefore, based on the need for increased investment, and on the success of contemporary programs in meeting that need through adaptable structures, this study found the creation of arts programs within the Extension Service to be a viable option for the development of cultural programming in small communities.

Historical Models for Arts Programming within the Cooperative Extension Service

The Cooperative Extension Service is a nationwide, educational network of state, local, and regional offices with affiliations to land-grant universities. Housed within the federal Department of Agriculture, these offices are staffed by experts who provide research-based information to agricultural producers, small business owners, youth, consumers, and others in rural areas. Although they are well known for service to the agricultural economy, the Cooperative Extension Service has a surprisingly robust history of fostering the arts in rural areas.

Several pioneers in the community arts field were enabled to produce rural arts programming through their affiliation with land-grant university agriculture departments. In the 1910s, Alfred Arvold became a faculty member in the North Dakota State University Agriculture Department and developed the "[Little Country Theatre Movement](#)". This was

among the first programs to leverage the arts as a means of fulfilling the mandate of the [Smith-Lever Act](#) (Overton, 1997). In 1936, the agriculture department at the University of Wisconsin employed the nation's first university artist-in-residence, John Steuart Curry, to work with rural farmers and their families. Additionally, Robert Gard developed the Wisconsin Idea Theatre in the 1940s through the Cooperative Extension Service in Wisconsin (Ewell, 2006).

These extension programs and others like them were ideal conduits for community arts programming in rural areas because they had existing relationships with rural communities through agricultural and homemaking programs. The arts programs of the Extension Service worked well historically because the rural citizenry was comfortable with engaging in such programs, and the infrastructure was in existence to disseminate programming to a wide range of geographically separated people.

An important indicator of the significance of extension programs in the history of the rural arts movement came in 1966 when Robert Gard and the Wisconsin Extension Service were awarded the National Endowment for the Arts' first grant for the arts in small communities. The grant funded three years of expansion into communities throughout the state of the now defunct Wisconsin Idea Theatre that had been fostering arts participation throughout Wisconsin since the early 1940s.

The receipt of this national honor by a rural arts program created by an agriculture department indicated the considerable significance of Extension Service arts programs. Recognition and financial investment by the national policy structure confirmed this historic program as a community arts model. In 1967, Robert Gard published his seminal rural arts book, [Arts in the Small Community](#). Within that publication, he asserted that colleges and universities had a growing interest in connecting their programs to the communities around them. He then briefly explained the long history of University-community partnership in Wisconsin:

For more than fifty years, the University has maintained field specialists in the community arts who help citizens to develop grassroots drama, music, and art...one of the most optimistic things that can be said about any plan for arts development in smaller communities is that many universities and colleges now have such help available and indeed welcome the opportunity to extend themselves (Gard, 2006, p. 60, para. 2).

By 1973, Gard's community arts program in Wisconsin employed 28 artists working statewide across disciplines and geographies. Maryo Gard Ewell (R. Gard's daughter) republished his landmark text in 2006 and explained the contemporary range of touring university programs to include everything from visual art exhibits and opera and musical performances to films and professional artists-in-residencies (Ewell, 2006). Additionally, she explained the contemporary opportunities for University-Community partnerships through the Extension Service:

The Extension Service is not just about agriculture. Its staff includes community development specialists, youth specialists, and more. In Wisconsin, 4-H and children's theatre have been almost synonymous for decades (Ewell, 2006, p. 104, para. 3).

The primary philosophy of each of these University-Community partnerships was the essential belief that all citizens are capable of producing "good" artwork, and that the focus of these programs must be on providing resources that facilitate local leadership in the production of artwork.

Contemporary Arts Programming within University-Community Partnerships

Alongside these historical examples, there are numerous Extension Service agencies that continue the tradition of arts programming in their communities. Extension Service arts programs are currently operated in Idaho, Kentucky, Massachusetts, and Wisconsin, and utilize the arts as a vehicle for community development through entrepreneurship and cultural tourism, youth development, and community arts.

In 1973, the University of Massachusetts established the [Arts Extension Service](#) to "take the arts resources of the University and share them with the Commonwealth" (UMass Amherst Arts Extension Service, 2010, p. 1, para. 1).

Now in their fortieth year, Massachusetts Arts Extension Service “fosters community-based arts activity through building relationships and collaborations among diverse cultural organizations, artists, arts educators, business organizations, and community groups in the four counties of Western Massachusetts” (Steinkamp, 2004, p. 169, para. 1). The Idaho and Southeastern Washington program, [Two Degrees Northwest](#), is a regionally-based cultural tourism project while Missouri is piloting a new program, [Community Arts Extension](#), in a single small community.

In keeping with Wisconsin’s long tradition of arts extension, their 4-H Arts and Communications Program has enrolled 19,000 Wisconsin youth in more than eighty individual projects in visual arts, performing arts, or communications (Taylor-Powell & Calvert, 2006). Moreover, in 2006, Maryo Gard Ewell and the [Robert Gard Foundation](#) partnered with the University of Wisconsin on “[Putting Culture Back into Agriculture](#),” a grant-based project that supported four rural places in exploring the connection of art and agriculture in their communities.

Alongside these isolated examples, the national 4-H organization revised their curriculum to emphasize [Communication and Expressive Arts](#) as a priority area that will effectively engage Extension Service programs across the country in youth programming related to communications, photography, and theatre arts (National 4-H Council, 2013).

Of all of the contemporary models, one the most developed initiatives operates within the University of Kentucky ([3](#)). Founded in 2005, the [Kentucky Fine Arts Extension Program](#) was founded as a pilot program in Pike County, Kentucky, with a mission to “enrich the quality of life of Pike County citizens and strengthen our communities through the coordination, education, and development of the arts” (“Fine arts,” n.d., p. 3, para. 1). The Fine Arts Extension initiative was considered by the University of Kentucky to be “the nation’s first Cooperative Extension Service program focusing on the fine arts” and was extended beyond the pilot to become a fully-supported Cooperative Extension Service program area in 2006 (Hale, 2005, pg. 1, para. 1). Over the past eight years, the program has expanded to serve five rural Kentucky counties with Fine Arts Extension specialists.

Recommendations to Community Arts Practitioners

In addition to widespread historical models and the contemporary state projects of, many communities have forged their own paths to leverage extension resources in building stronger arts communities. For land-grant universities across the nation with mandates for service to their entire state, colleges and universities are realigning their academic and outreach priorities to consider regional needs including the arts and culture (Steinkamp, 2004).

The Cooperative Extension Service is structured differently in each state, attempting to respond to the specific needs and concerns of each local community it engages. If you or your organization would like to explore the possibility of a Cooperative Extension Service partnership, I strongly encourage you to contact your local extension agent. If your local Cooperative Extension Service chapter does not currently offer arts programming as a primary focus, they may be incorporating arts curriculum in their homemaker or 4-H programs. Your state level Cooperative Extension Service Community and Economic Development office may also be open to building arts partnerships in your community. Beyond the Cooperative Extension Service model, many university arts and arts administration programs may have practicum and internship programs that could benefit your organization. Reach out to your local Cooperative Extension Service agents and university programs, and explore broadening the university-community partnerships in your region.

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Author Note

Savannah Barrett earned a Masters in Arts Management at the University of Oregon in Spring, 2013. She is a

passionate advocate for arts access in geographically and economically isolated places, and serves as Program Director for the *Art of the Rural*. She began her career in arts management while in high school as a founder of a local arts agency in Grayson County, Kentucky. Savannah has worked with a variety of arts management organizations over the past ten years: the Kentucky Governor's School for the Arts, the Louisville Visual Art Association (Louisville, KY), Salvo Collective (Louisville, KY), the University of Oregon Arts and Administration Program and the Center for Community Arts and Cultural Policy (Eugene, OR). She now resides in Louisville, Kentucky.

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1. About 1 percent of American philanthropy is devoted to rural development: "Rural organizations received only 153 of the 10,905 grants made, approximately 1.4 percent of grants" (Cohen & Barkhamer, 2004). Additionally, "corporate grantmaking for rural groups constituted 0.7 percent of the grant dollars awarded by all of the 124 surveyed corporations" in the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy's 2004 report (Cohen & Barkhamer, 2004). Moreover, the typical amount of the grant was also smaller in rural areas than in their urban equivalents, averaging \$7,981 compared to an average grant size of \$17,751 for corporations' grants to all charities (Cohen & Barkhamer, 2004). If resource investment were evenly distributed across the United States based on per-capita rationale, rural Americans would have enjoyed an additional \$28 billion of investment in 2010 (Wyant, 2012). While American philanthropy has shifted significantly since the 2008-2009 economic crisis, these numbers are still significant in lending context to underinvestment in rural communities.

2. According to the 2008 National Endowment for the Arts' (NEA) Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA), just 12% of non-profit arts organizations are located outside of urban centers with a population of 50,000 or more (Iyengar, 2010).

3. The Director of the Community and Economic Development (Dr. Charles Stamper) in the Kentucky program has volunteered to counsel any communities or Cooperative Extension Service agents in the development of an arts extension program in your area. To learn more about the historical and contemporary arts programs of the Cooperative Extension Service, please read the full report.

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