

Introduction

In seeking to develop a stronger private resource mobilization capacity, Cooperative Extension faces a paradox. There is no national Extension brand, presence or capacity, and yet, simultaneously, Extension is present across the nation, with multiple Extension brands that have varying levels of presence and capacity at, within and across states and the nation. These entities include the National Extension Directors Association, National 4-H Council, the eXtension Foundation, the Foundation for Food and Agricultural Research, the Association of Extension Administrators, the Association of Research Directors, ECOP, each of the Extension units at the land grant universities, and each of the state-level 4-H Foundations. In many cases, leaders and members of these organizations interlock. In some cases, each of these entities is a separate nonprofit. Whether separate from or embedded in another institution, each entity has its own mission, networks and relationships, and program integrity. A national capability exists; a national system does not.

A national Cooperative Extension fundraising effort or infrastructure assumes and requires that all of these elements have the potential to be coordinated and enhanced, programmatically and financially, without compromising their individual integrity. In this way, the national function is to lift the visibility, brand and value proposition of the entirety to a critical mass of capacity for problem solving. It is decidedly not to impose national rigidity onto what was created to be, and is still, a capacity for local responsiveness.

The national Extension resource mobilization effort, then, is to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. It seeks out opportunities for collaboration across institutional components either in response to funding opportunities or to cultivate funding opportunities. It provides a canopy built upon the strength of the “legs” of each program entity. Under that canopy, new initiatives can be designed and funded, or under which any programmatic parts of several, multiple, or all of the constituent organizations can be brought together for funding strategies. The individual organizations, their missions, and brands are not lost, they are blended to attract resources at scale to what Extension in its totality does, or to what it could do. The individual capacities become the “ribs” of the fundraising strategy. In turn, those ribs, extending across the system to other programs, provide scale and stability to the structure, and the combinations of capabilities that are possible expands the potential scope and reach of fundraising in being able to partner with funders of many perspectives.



Nor does the canopy approach impede individual components from fundraising for their own needs or programs. The integrity of each pillar remains, as does its ability to pursue funding for its own programs in its own markets. The overall effort emphasizes communication across all organizations to inform each leg of the program and fundraising efforts of others, thereby to avoid confusion by funders who may be approached by multiple pillars, and to conceive of and fundraise for universal needs of all systems and the mutual programmatic opportunities of any subset of organization. The canopy approach allows the whole of national Cooperative Extension to be greater than the sum of its parts.

Ideally from a fundraising point of view, it is a separate nonprofit, but with very clear and close alignment with the brands of its constituent parts. Those parts also align their brands with the national Cooperative Extension brand so that funders are receiving a message about the unique programmatic capacity of each of the entities but also the larger strength that is represented by the whole.

However, the evolution of a separate organization can take place in parallel with the establishment of a national fund development system and capacity that can span the potential of the whole, across Cooperative Extension in programmatic and geographic terms. Indeed, a gradual approach will be necessary for at least five reasons.

- First, several parts of the system are in their infancy, and their own directions and priorities are currently unclear.
- Second, with the exception of the National 4-H Council, a few of the 4-H state foundations, and Extension at the University of Minnesota (which is its own academic College) no institution has well established private fundraising systems or priorities focused on its work or on Extension. Therefore, building the strength of the whole will require building strength in the parts.
- Third, the fundraising interests of the land grant universities, and of Extension within these universities, will need to be accommodated; this is a wide-ranging and complex problem and will need to be taken on place by place.
- Fourth, determining the substantive priorities for fundraising, a combination of current programs and new efforts, will take time.
- Fifth, multiple organizations already pay into one or more of these constituent institutions. Although that payment does not include fundraising support, adding a financial obligation onto constituent institutions will require a clear value proposition and the ability to deliver on that proposition. The “opt in” strategy will likely begin with a core group and spread as funding results become evident.

That having been said, it is important to have a vision of the end-state of a national Cooperative Extension fund development function and capacity and what it could ultimately accomplish.

If we envision, for example, a national resource mobilization function that seeks both to generate resources for national initiatives and, within the next several years, to conduct a 9-figure major national capital campaign to endow elements of Extension nationally and/or at all 75 land grant universities, the structures that support that function will need to be best-in-class. If we wish to start down that road, however slowly, carefully, and methodically, what would best practices look like?

Beginning at the Beginning: Best Practices

In a perfect world, what would we do?

Successful private resource mobilization is a product of two intersecting assets in a best-in-class fundraising nonprofit: a strong overall organization and a strong fundraising infrastructure. Pausing to understand the key elements of such an organization will help to level set the subsequent discussion of priority areas of attention for a private resource mobilization strategy for national Cooperative Extension.

The elements of a strong nonprofit **organization** include:

- Brand
 - Your brand is your promise. A recognized brand that is widely known and trusted

- A clear mission relative to a clear problem statement
- Programs
 - Program alignment with mission
 - Clear demand for programs on the part of relevant constituents or markets
- Leadership
 - Identifiable and accountable organizational leadership
 - Strong Board governance with clear skills and capacities to carry out transparent roles and responsibilities
- Finances
 - Positive net financial balance
 - Transparent financials with clean and open audits
- Performance metrics
 - Program impact
 - Financial and program efficiency

The elements of a strong **fundraising** infrastructure include:

- Capacity
 - Experienced advancement leaders
 - Overall organizational and program leadership that is committed to and engaged in advancement; fundraising is not a department it is an organizational culture
 - Systems and policies for all stages from prospect identification through stewardship
 - Collaboration between program and advancement leaders to constantly ensure maximum alignment between resource markets and program execution
- Case for Support
 - A clear and compelling case for support
 - Demonstrates a well-defined need or opportunity
 - Positions the organization as the answer or solution
 - Articulates how resources will be used to implement that solution
 - Matches donor interests with program areas
- Prospects
 - Deep field of individuals and institutions with potential interest in the case and the organization, or any subset of its activities; continued research to constantly grow that pool of individuals and institutions
 - Secure, reliable, and growing relationships with an increasing group of individuals or institutions identified in that pool
 - Development and maintenance of a core of loyal supporters who can constantly open up new opportunities for new prospect relationships
- Leadership
 - Private voluntary leaders (Board and others) who are willing and able to represent the organization and its case, trigger access to ever increasing networks, and “give or get” themselves
- Plan
 - A multi-year, step-by-step plan for mobilizing leaders and accessing resources against a clear financial goal