Our History

The Oregon State University Extension Service engages the people of Oregon with research-based knowledge and education that strengthen communities and economies, sustain natural resources, and promote healthy families and individuals.

One hundred years and one mission

Half the town is crowded around the railway station, each person jostling for a good spot to see the train when it arrives. But the train they are expecting is not delivering the usual freight of goods and people. It's a demonstration train, and it's delivering education.

The steam engine chugs to a stop, the doors of a freight car open, and there inside is a fully equipped laboratory, to demonstrate the latest advances of modern farm industry and home life.

C.I. Lewis talking from the Oregon Agricultural College Farming Demonstration Train. Early 1900s.

Courtesy of OSU Special Collections and Archives Research Center, HC1547_Lewis.

By 1911, when railroads were just starting to reach communities beyond the Willamette Valley, faculty at Oregon Agricultural College (OAC) saw their chance to reach people far from the Corvallis campus. Professors used demonstration trains to deliver useful information that would improve lives and livelihoods across Oregon.

From the beginning, OAC faculty brought research-based knowledge to communities far from campus, a mission and a service that became known as Extension.
During the early 20th century, OAC Extension was becoming part of the fabric of rural Oregon. Generations of Oregon kids would grow up in 4-H, while their mothers led home study groups and their fathers tuned in to Extension's radio farm reports. As people moved from farming communities to cities and suburban neighborhoods, Extension was there with programs for civic engagement and leadership.

Today, Oregon State University Extension 4-H offers projects in technology training and youth leadership. Thousands of trained OSU Extension volunteers give time to their communities to create public gardens, advise woodland managers, and clean up neighborhood streams. OSU Extension faculty across the state offer research-based expertise in health and nutrition, children and families, forestry, agriculture, marine science, and community development.

The story of OSU Extension mirrors the story of Oregon. From the beginning, Extension's focus was more than agriculture. It was service to the whole family, in the whole community, across the whole state.

**How did it begin?**

At the close of the 19th century, most Oregonians were newcomers living on newly established farms. They approached their work much the same way their fathers and grandfathers had, clinging to methods that had worked well enough back in Minnesota or Germany.

It was the mission of Oregon's land-grant college to research practical solutions to real problems, and OAC faculty spent part of their time traveling by horseback or train to organize farmers'
institutes and deliver lectures to far-flung communities. Their topics aimed to improve rural life, from food safety and family nutrition to animal husbandry and pest management. Demonstrations might draw hundreds of people.

Mobile kitchen, part of the Extension Service's Farm Electrification Exhibit, 1938.

Courtesy of OSU Archives, HC_0975_mobile_kitchen.

Oregonians have always loved learning, and the demand grew. OAC faculty wrote educational pamphlets and columns for the state's three largest newspapers. They gave correspondence courses in accounting, rural law, and farm economics; they volunteered as judges at county and State Fairs; and they worked with public schools to teach boys' and girls' Industrial Clubs, the forerunners of Extension 4-H clubs in Oregon.

Eventually, faculty were working off campus so much that OAC President W.J. Kerr established a recognized division within the college dedicated solely to the educational service of communities beyond campus. On July 24, 1911, the Board of Regents established the Extension Service at Oregon Agricultural College.
Education as national security

Since the beginning of our nation’s history, leaders have seen the importance of public education to economic development and national security. For Abraham Lincoln, education was “the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in.” At the height of the Civil War, Lincoln proved his commitment by signing legislation that created the nation’s land-grant universities. It was more than an agenda for education; it was an agenda for democracy.

The legislation, drafted by Vermont representative Justin Morrill, was the high point of a national ideal: that educated citizens were necessary for a successful democracy. In 1859, 3 months into his first term in Congress, Morrill entered a resolution to establish national agricultural colleges in each state of the union. The resolution was rejected. He tried again, facing fierce opposition from southern and western states who felt the bill impinged on states’ rights. Morrill pressed on. When the bill finally passed both houses, it was vetoed by President James Buchanan.

When Morrill again submitted his bill in 1862, many of the dissenting states had withdrawn from the union. The new bill included one significant addition for a nation at war: military arts were
added to the curriculum of agriculture and mechanical arts. President Lincoln signed the bill into law on July 2, 1862.

The vision that began with the Morrill Act continued with the Hatch Act of 1887, which established a national network of agricultural experiment stations, and the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, which created an extension service at each land-grant university. Together, the three laws established the three cornerstones of the land-grant mission: education, research, and extension.

**A model for the nation**

The Oregon Agricultural College Extension Service was established 3 years before the Smith-Lever Act. OAC Extension’s first director, Ralph D. Hetzel, was a lawyer and professor of political science at OAC. His first priority was to partner with county governments.

Faculty Extension agents were soon stationed in counties and began developing programs to meet local needs. In Coos County, for example, agent J.L. Smith showed people how to improve dairy production and pasture quality, delivering his demonstrations by boat instead of buggy across the roadless coastal county.

During the 1920s, Extension director Paul V. Maris organized the first of a series of statewide economic conferences, followed by county-based conferences to define the direction of Extension education. The Extension Service continued to sponsor these conferences throughout the 20th century to identify community needs. This became the model for Extension programming across the nation.

Among the first needs identified were instructions in home economics. In the early 20th century, OAC’s home economics department was part of a new national movement to teach future homemakers chemistry, nutrition, family health, efficiency engineering, and household economics. The goal was to transform the housewife’s work from drudgery to a science-based craft.

Oregon homemakers welcomed Extension’s outreach. They organized home study groups and community action based on the new home economics. Such Extension programs led to hot-lunch programs in schools, nutrition education for low-income families, and improved sanitation in rural homes.

Later in the century, hunger in Oregon became a major focus for Extension faculty as they took the lead in educating local Food Stamp recipients about nutrition and healthy eating habits.
A focus on youth

From the beginning, OAC Extension’s focus included youth. The Extension 4-H program empowered Oregon’s young people to be responsible, entrepreneurial, and have fun doing it. Clubs, such as woodworking, cooking, and vegetable gardening, encouraged kids to take a scientific approach to their daily responsibilities, keeping records and striving for improvement from year to year.

“Youth development” was not the term used a century ago to describe Extension’s programs for kids, but that was certainly their purpose. They emphasized measured improvement and building skills.

Oregon was the first state to create Extension 4-H clubs for urban kids, and in 1918, clubs in the City of Portland converted part of their school grounds to Victory Gardens.

By mid-century, 4-H had expanded to include wildlife conservation projects, photography clubs, and opportunities for kids to experience state and federal government in action.
In the 1960s, nearly 20 percent of all Oregon school children were enrolled in Extension 4-H clubs, two-thirds of them from urban and suburban families.

“The real strength of the 4-H program in Oregon is building young people who are well rounded,” said Duane Johnson, a leader of the 4-H program during the 1970s and 80s. Johnson helped develop the Community Pride program, which trained Extension 4-H members to see the needs in their communities and to plan and carry out service projects in response. Young people learned to plan projects from raising livestock to mapping disaster evacuation routes, and how to present their accomplishments to 4-H judges and the public.

Malheur County Boys and Girls Club judging team and club leaders at 4-H summer school, 1922. Courtesy of OSU Archives, P146_0154.

**Education across the airways**

Eventually, Oregon’s Agricultural College became Oregon State University. But the letters OAC stayed etched in the college radio station, KOAC. Radio in the early 20th century (like the Internet at the end of the 20th century) was adapted from technology originally designed for the military and national security.

OAC Extension’s director of information, Wallace Kadderly, saw the potential for radio to deliver Extension education. He championed building a broadcast radio station powerful enough to cover the entire state.
In 1925, the College celebrated the opening of the 500-watt KOAC with Kadderly as its program director and announcer. “Radio erases city limits and state lines, and causes to disappear the boundaries of nations, creeds, and partisanship,” Kadderly said.

Gustave Y. Hagglund in the Physics building in the KOAC announcer's room, 1929.

KOAC’s slogan was “Science for Service,” and its purpose “to make the resources of this institution more fully available to the state.” The programming that went over the airwaves revolutionized Extension’s educational outreach.

In KOAC’s first year of operation, the OAC Extension Service broadcast 313 lectures, “selected because of their practical application in the home, on the farm, or in business,” according to Kadderly.

In any given week, KOAC may have reported on: control of insects and plant diseases, weekly crop market news, programs for 4-H members, and homemakers’ programs on everything from child development to costume design. Broadcasts ranged from house heating to psychology and from automobile repair to political economics. Beginning in 1929, talented 4-H club members performed their own radio plays live on KOAC.

By 1932, following the creation of the Oregon State System of Higher Education, all extension activities across Oregon’s public universities were combined into one General Extension Division, and Kadderly expanded KOAC’s educational programming.

Homemaker clubs across the state studied child development from broadcast lectures; a home study course on poultry science drew 603 registered learners.
Kadderly’s Oregon School of the Air broadcast radio-based high-school courses on topics from agricultural engineering to shorthand.

The KOAC building. Courtesy of OSU Archives, HC0598.

Radio farm reports by Extension agricultural agents were a popular KOAC feature through most of the century. Following World War II, Bill Smith led Extension communications into television. His weekly program, “Oregon at Work,” chronicled the people and innovations in Oregon agriculture and business. One favorite episode had Smith on camera reporting rangeland management news as an amorous bull crossed behind him, unscripted and in hot pursuit of a willing cow.

**Extension during the war**

It was during the Great Depression that Extension expanded its role from teacher to leader and activist.
Federal emergency relief programs needed local administration, and few knew local communities better than the Extension agents who lived and worked there.

Extension agents delivered the New Deal, running federal programs such as gasoline rationing, salvage, and farm fire protection.

During World War II, Extension took responsibility for federal domestic war projects, organizing the Neighborhood Leader Plan to reach rural families with information on programs to control inflation, conserve wartime resources, and boost food production with Victory Gardens.

Extension agents were leaders for the Emergency Farm Labor Service that organized temporary workforces of women and children and helped recruit Braceros to work Oregon farms.

After the war, Extension agents helped establish veteran agricultural advisory boards in every county and supported agricultural enterprises for Japanese-Americans released from internment.

Muriel White, member of 4-H Victory Garden Club, shows the proper way to suckering of corn, 1942. Courtesy of OSU Archives, P62-459.
Growing Oregon’s economy

Extension was central to the Oregon economy’s postwar growth. As they had in the 1920s and ’30s, Extension leaders sponsored economic development conferences in every county of the state to identify opportunities and educational needs.

Under Frank Ballard’s leadership, Extension delivered more and more research-based scientific and technical information to the rapidly growing urban sector. Trained as a journalist, Ballard served as Extension Editor of Publications and as president of Oregon State College before becoming head of the OSC Extension Service in 1945.

He understood that educational outreach to the agricultural and forestry industries helped create jobs for Oregon.

They say that Ballard personally interviewed everyone who came to work for OSC Extension. If, at the end of your interview, Ballard told you to “go out and do good work,” you knew you got the job.

This personal commitment was reflected throughout the organization. County-based Extension agents continued the leadership they had taken on during the war, serving on regional land commissions, health committees, chambers of commerce, and school boards.

With the post-war boom in natural resource industries and an influx of new immigrants, Oregon needed new tools—and Extension provided them.

In 1967, Bob Jacobson became the first OSU Extension agent in hip boots, serving people in the fishing industry. As his agricultural counterparts had witnessed a generation earlier, Jacobson was greeted with skepticism from the community he was to serve.
Frank L. Ballard, Extension Service Associate Director and president of Oregon State College.

Courtesy of OSU Archives, P1-69.
“I spent the first 6 months identifying immediate needs in the coastal communities,” said the former OSU basketball star.

What he saw was a complete lack of communication between fishermen and the agencies that regulated their industry. Jacobson convened a series of town hall meetings to bring communities and regulators together to plan for a shared future.

Later, Jacobson helped establish Oregon’s first watershed councils, which pioneered community-based management of shared water resources.

The 1960s and ’70s were boom times for Oregon’s forest industry and research within OSU’s College of Forestry. Until then, forestry had been a secondary assignment for a handful of agricultural agents.

OSU Extension expanded its forestry faculty to deliver training in woodland management and to extend research to the new Christmas tree production industry.

Under the guidance of OSU Extension foresters, Christmas tree production was transformed into a science, and Oregon became a national leader in the industry.

**Meeting a growing population's needs**

To reach more people with research-based information, OSU Extension developed Master-level educational programs for community volunteers, who in turn provided community education as Master Gardeners, Master Woodland Managers, Master Watershed Stewards, Master Food Educators, and more.

Each year, Extension volunteers contribute weeks, sometimes months, leading service programs in their communities.

During the 1980s, natural resource industries saw a sharp decline. Farms were in default, mills were shutting down, and commercial fishing began to see the first of many closures. Alice Morrow was one of many OSU Extension faculty who developed programs to help families hurt by this decline and to transition workers to new careers.

OSU Extension helped people understand critical issues such as poverty, salmon, and sustainability by publishing tabloids in all major newspapers across the state.

In the early 1990s, state funding for higher education in Oregon dwindled. OSU Extension programs established new partnerships with community colleges, the Oregon Food Bank, school districts, and community groups. In 2007, OSU placed Extension within the **Division of Extension and Engagement**.

Today, county-based OSU Extension faculty still serve as leaders in their communities as Extension reaches new audiences online and through dispersed Open Campuses being developed in collaboration with local leadership.
OSU Extension continues to deliver education in new ways. Many of the techniques that radio pioneered continue today through the Internet. Lifelong learning reaches across the state with Extension education both on site and online. The purpose is unchanged: a well-educated citizenry is essential for economic and community development. One hundred years, one mission.

See related OSU Extension Centennial Animation video: https://youtu.be/BMIpMig1Zp0

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