

Articles

Strengthening Research Capacity: An Action Plan for the University of Saskatchewan Extension Division

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a case study of how the University of Saskatchewan Extension Division developed an action plan to strengthen its research capacity. Its Action Plan outlines 20 actions, organized into five strategic categories: cultivating a productive research climate; promoting faculty development and faculty renewal; engaging in graduate-level teaching and learning; developing research infrastructure and supportive administrative processes; and encouraging and celebrating research excellence. The body of the article contains an abridged version of the Action Plan, with details such as timelines and lines of responsibility removed. Although written for the University of Saskatchewan Extension Division, this plan is pertinent to many university continuing education units across Canada.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente une étude de cas sur la façon par laquelle la Division de formation permanente de l'Université de la Saskatchewan a développé un plan d'action pour renforcer ses capacités de recherche. Dans ce Plan d'action, on y trouve les grandes lignes de vingt actions organisées en cinq catégories stratégiques : la cultivation d'un climat de recherche productif ; la favorisation du développement et du renouvellement du corps professoral ; l'engagement dans l'enseignement et dans l'apprentissage aux deuxième et troisième cycles ; le développement d'une infrastructure de recherche et des pratiques administratives positives ; et, l'encouragement et la célébration de l'excellence en recherche. Le corps de l'article contient une version abrégée du Plan d'action ne comprenant ni

le calendrier des activités ni les chaînes de responsabilités. Bien qu'écrit pour la Division d'éducation permanente à l'Université de la Saskatchewan, ce plan peut se rapporter à plusieurs unités d'éducation permanente dans les universités canadiennes.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the role of research in the work of university continuing education units across Canada has been the subject of considerable discussion and debate. In the early 1990s, Thompson and Wagner (1994) characterized scholarship and practice in the field of university continuing education as "two solitudes." By the beginning of the next decade, Garrison (2001, p. 93) located research as fundamental to the success of university continuing education units. Thompson (1996, p. 66) presented four basic reasons why continuing education practitioners should engage in research.

1. Research activities support quality programming.
2. Professional competence is maintained and enhanced through research.
3. University continuing education units have a leadership role to play in conducting research that contributes to practice.
4. Undertaking research enhances individual and unit credibility within the institution.

Despite these seemingly persuasive reasons to engage in research, there are significant barriers to the practice of research at university continuing education units in Canada (Percival & Kops, 1999). Such barriers include the mandates and culture of many university continuing education units, the nature of staff and faculty appointments at such units, and the experiences and qualifications of those who work in such units.

The existence of such barriers to research is a significant challenge. In 1999, the continuing education units of the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan held a symposium to discuss and promote research in the field (Sloane-Seale, 1999). One outcome of that symposium was a set of recommendations regarding what the participating units could do, both individually and collectively, to strengthen their research efforts. At the University of Saskatchewan Extension Division, enhancing research pro-

ductivity became one of the four priorities of the unit's strategic plan developed in the year 2000. The ongoing concern with promoting research led to the creation of the Action Plan for Strengthening Research Capacity.

The Action Plan began with my appointment as the Associate Dean (Research) in October 2001. One of my first priorities in this new role was to engage faculty at the Extension Division in an extended discussion of research and its place in our organization. In late November, we held a "dialogue on research" retreat. At this retreat, we reflected upon what research meant to us as practitioners and scholars of adult and continuing education. We talked about what it would mean for us to place greater emphasis on research, and we talked about the potential risks and rewards of becoming more productive researchers. By the end of the retreat we recognized that, if we were going to build our capacity to undertake research, we needed to make some very concrete and practical changes.

Following the retreat, in an effort to organize these concrete and practical changes into a coherent framework, I wrote the first draft of the Action Plan presented in this article. That draft was distributed to all Extension faculty members in January 2002, and it was discussed at faculty meetings, by e-mail exchange, and at a second retreat in April 2002. Following that second retreat, the plan was revised into its current state. As you will read below, it begins with a preamble that situates research in the mission of the Extension Division. It then presents 20 recommendations for action, organized according to five strategic categories: cultivating a productive research climate; promoting faculty development and faculty renewal; engaging in graduate-level teaching and learning; developing research infrastructure and supportive administrative processes; and encouraging and celebrating research excellence. The remainder of this article contains an abridged version of the Action Plan, with details such as timelines and lines of responsibility removed.

The Action Plan provides a case study of how one continuing education unit is trying to build a policy framework that will encourage research productivity among its faculty members. Although it has not been operational long enough to allow a review of its effectiveness, its description should be useful to others in the field of continuing education interested in building policies and environments within which research practices can be enhanced.

THE ACTION PLAN

Preamble

We are the University's focal point for planning and delivering innovative extension programs in response to the aspirations of the individuals, organizations, and communities we serve. Our global approach to education enhances the social and economic well-being of the people of Saskatchewan, Canada, and beyond. We engage in scholarship that contributes significantly to professional practice in adult, continuing, and distance education.

Research practices inhere to the mission of the University of Saskatchewan Extension Division. Understanding the aspirations of the individuals, organizations, and communities served by the Division requires Extension faculty members to undertake ongoing research and consultation activities. Planning and delivering innovative extension programs requires them to maintain an awareness of current practice and scholarship in adult, continuing, and distance education and to meaningfully evaluate their own programs and practices. Contributing to the professional practices of others requires them to disseminate knowledge through teaching, publishing, and making presentations to professional and scholarly audiences.

The University of Saskatchewan Extension Division strives to undertake excellent extension work and to be a leader in the scholarship of adult, continuing, and distance education. These two goals are interconnected. Good research enhances the quality of programs and courses. Constructing and delivering quality programs and courses provides an empirical basis for research.

The Extension Division encourages its faculty members to engage in a diverse range of research activities. Such diversity helps to develop knowledge of importance to many people in our province and our world, crossing borders often associated with academic disciplines and social categories such as gender, ethnicity, class, and age. Yet, despite the diverse and interdisciplinary nature of research undertaken at the Extension Division, there is a common thread that links much of that research. This common thread is a concern with adult, continuing, and distance education and with the connections between such forms of education and their social and cultural environment.

Research at the Extension Division contributes in a distinctive way to the overall goals of the University of Saskatchewan. The focus of Extension faculty members on adult, continuing, and distance education leads to new knowledge and practices that can assist the University to improve the qual-

ity of instructional programs. The Extension Division is committed to diverse forms of research that nurture linkages between the University and communities across Saskatchewan and that serve the needs and aspirations of diverse communities, including those of the province's growing Aboriginal population.

Five Priorities for Action

In February 2000, the Research Committee of Council released a document entitled *Increasing Research Intensiveness at the University of Saskatchewan* (www.usask.ca/research/increasing.shtml). That document makes the claim that the "University of Saskatchewan is committed to the goal of establishing itself as one of Canada's leading research universities in the next decade." It endorses five priorities to enable the University to reach this goal:

- supporting and facilitating individual, collaborative, and multidisciplinary research by cultivating a productive research climate at the University of Saskatchewan;
- recognizing the centrality of research as the University proceeds with faculty renewal, and appreciating that faculty renewal involves both new and existing faculty;
- supporting growth in size and quality of graduate education and graduate research programs;
- developing appropriate research infrastructure and administrative processes to facilitate research intensiveness;
- promoting, encouraging, and celebrating research excellence.

The remainder of this Action Plan describes how the Extension Division intends to pursue these five priorities. The document does not endeavour to shape the nature of research undertaken by Extension faculty members. Rather, its goal is to strengthen the foundation upon which faculty members will intensify their research efforts and achieve greater research productivity.

1. Cultivating a productive research climate

Research productivity at the Extension Division is primarily dependent upon the interest and initiative of individual faculty members. As the Research Committee of Council (www.usask.ca/research/increasing.shtml) observes:

The drive, inspiration, and innovation for research come first and foremost from faculty members and students. The University must create a supportive environment that encourages and rewards successful research activity.

In its entirety, the Action Plan is designed to contribute to the establishment of a productive research climate. However, there are four specific actions that the Extension Division will take to contribute directly to creating an organizational culture that supports and encourages research.

Action 1.1: Engage Extension faculty members in a dialogue on research issues

Engaging faculty members in explicit discussion about research and its role in the work of the Extension Division is one means of directly encouraging a productive research climate. We will engage in a public and participatory process of discussion, debate, and consensus building around questions related to research. These questions may be organized into three basic categories: those related to meaning (What would it mean for the Extension Division to become more research intensive?), those related to the will to act (Why would the Extension Division want to become more research intensive?), and those related to strategy (How should the Extension Division go about becoming more research intensive?).

Action 1.2: Produce a concept paper on research in extension

One challenge that the Extension Division faces in building a productive research climate is the absence of a shared understanding of research and its place in the professional practice of extension. Most faculty members at the University of Saskatchewan work in departments where faculty members share a reasonably similar pattern of graduate studies in their discipline. Therefore, they share reasonably similar training and socialization with respect to research. The diversity of disciplinary backgrounds among Extension faculty members, and the historical absence of graduate courses in research methodology specific to the practice of adult, continuing, and distance education, means that such faculty members do not necessarily share a common understanding of what research means. A brief concept paper about the nature of research and its relationship to extension practice was produced to promote such a common understanding. The paper has been posted to the Division's website (http://www.extension.usask.ca/ExtensionDivision/about/research/research_scholarship_extfc.html) and will be revised as necessary.

Action 1.3: Restructure workloads and budgets across the Extension Division

Time is a key constraint to the Extension Division's pursuit of greater research productivity. Faculty members have important and demanding responsibilities with regard to extension programming and instructional design. It has been a convention at the Extension Division that professorial appointments allocate 60 percent of their workload to professional practice, 20 percent to research and scholarly work, and 20 percent to University and community service (including committee work). For extension specialist

appointments, it has been conventional that 80 percent of their workload is allocated to the practice of professional skills and 20 percent to University and community service (including committee work). For both professorial and extension specialist appointments, research is typically part of the practice of professional skills. However, time constraints very often mean that scholarship undertaken as part of professional practice is not developed into concrete research products (i.e., articles, conference presentations, lectures, policy papers) and disseminated to other scholars and practitioners.

The lack of time for faculty members to engage in research practices relates to the financial models that have been adopted at the Extension Division, especially since the budgetary reductions of the 1990s. Program directors (a majority of Extension faculty members) are expected to deliver some amount of net revenue beyond the direct costs of operating their extension programs. Instructional designers are required to manage their workloads to fulfill course production and revision schedules that help finance the salaries of those designers in out-of-scope positions. The current financial models within which most Extension faculty members work hinder their ability to dedicate time to research.

Workload and budgetary restructuring are key to unleashing the potential of Extension faculty members to become more productive researchers. In recent years, non-faculty appointments (known as program coordinators or administrative assistants) have been hired to take on some of the non-scholarly functions of extension programming that have historically demanded much time and attention from faculty members. Further restructuring of workloads will be necessary to help faculty members focus on scholarly activities, while non-faculty appointments undertake the tasks of administration, facilitation, and course production required to maintain the Extension Division's commitment to extension programming and instructional design.

Action 1.4: Invite visiting scholars to the Extension Division

Inviting practitioners and researchers from other institutions to spend some time at the Extension Division will contribute to promoting a productive research culture. The fact that our practice and scholarship are of interest to others will help cultivate our reputation as a leading extension unit. The presence of visiting scholars will stimulate Extension faculty members' curiosity about new research questions and facilitate potential collaborative work with scholars from other institutions. Terms of reference will be developed in order to guide the selection of Visiting Scholars, and resources will be sought in order to provide modest travel or living expense support to such scholars.

2. Promoting faculty development and faculty renewal

The Extension Division will successfully increase its research intensity only to the extent that its faculty members believe such a goal is important and commit themselves to its achievement. There are two main ways that the Extension Division can build its human resource capacity for research: developing the knowledge, skills, and confidence of existing faculty members; and hiring appropriate new faculty members.

Since many Extension faculty members have stronger backgrounds as practitioners than as scholars, a concerted effort must be made to ensure that we have the opportunity to develop our capacity to succeed as researchers. We need to recruit new faculty members with experience or demonstrated potential to become effective researchers in extension. We need to ensure that such faculty members are appointed with clear expectations that scholarly productivity will be an important component of their workload with the Division.

Action 2.1: Focus new faculty recruitment, appointment, and orientation

Faculty recruitment activities will ensure that the selection of new Extension faculty members takes into consideration their capacity to contribute toward our collective research capacity. Letters of appointment for new faculty members will ensure that they arrive with clear expectations that scholarly productivity will be an important component of their workload with the Division. Orientation processes will ensure that new faculty members be given the opportunity to engage in a formal mentoring relationship with a tenured faculty member having solid research experience.

The Extension Division is committed to employment equity. Efforts will be made to attract and retain faculty members from the four designated groups as defined by the University of Saskatchewan. Ensuring a diverse group of faculty members will enhance our research practices by contributing to the diversity of our research interests and methodologies.

Action 2.2: Monitor annual workload planning processes

Within the guidelines of the Collective Agreement, clear and consistent expectations will be established that faculty members' workloads include research and other scholarly activities. This will ensure that faculty members have time for research built into their workload. It will also ensure that they commit to producing and disseminating something tangible of interest to other practitioners and scholars of adult, continuing, and distance education each year.

Action 2.3: Influence tenure, promotion, and merit increases

Within the guidelines of the Collective Agreement, research and other scholarly activities will have an appropriate role in tenure and promotion decisions, as well as in the allocation of special salary increases. Research productivity should be understood as a fundamental expectation of all Extension faculty members, and the processes of granting tenure, promotion, and merit increases should reflect this expectation. This expectation is not meant to marginalize or devalue the other professional practices of Extension faculty members. The new Extension Division Standards for Promotion and Tenure make clearer and more demanding expectations of research productivity for both professorial and extension specialist ranks.

Action 2.4: Encourage professional development

Professional development opportunities will be made available to those who would like to build their knowledge, skill, and confidence with a range of methods and practices related to research. This will include organizing short workshops and making faculty members aware of courses and seminars available at the University of Saskatchewan and elsewhere. A reading circle may be organized. Faculty members will be encouraged, where appropriate, to take degree-credit courses that would support their professional development in this area.

Action 2.5: Provide personal encouragement and coaching

Encouragement and coaching will be provided to faculty members wishing to apply for external research funding or to publish their work in scholarly or professional journals. Such encouragement and coaching will include exploring new ideas, proofreading draft documents, and giving advice with regard to methodological choices. Such processes may be undertaken on an ad hoc basis, and they may form part of a more formal mentoring relationship.

Action 2.6: Provide modest financial support to research

Some research projects can be greatly assisted through small amounts of financial support. Others require more extensive financial inputs, but could benefit from small initial investments ("seed money") to acquire external funding. Extension faculty members' research productivity could be enhanced if there was a dedicated source of modest financial support for small projects and start-up activities. Such a fund will be established, and terms of reference for its management will be developed. Although such a fund will likely focus on supporting the production of research (e.g., cost of research assistants), it may also become a source of support for the dissemination of research (e.g., presentation of research results at conferences).

3. Engaging in graduate-level teaching and learning

Becoming more actively involved in teaching and supervising graduate students will be an important step toward greater research productivity for the Extension Division. To teach graduate students in extension requires a cutting-edge knowledge of the field and an experiential base in both research and practice. To supervise graduate students' theses requires competence in a variety of research methods and an ability to relate students' interests to the professional and scholarly expectations of the field. Graduate teaching and supervision will demand a disciplined engagement with research on the part of Extension faculty members. In return, the research and practice activities of graduate students will enrich the scholarly and professional practices of our faculty and staff.

The Extension Division will be involved in graduate-level teaching and learning. This involvement will be an important cornerstone of our overall commitment to enhancing our research intensity in the coming years. Three specific actions will be undertaken.

Action 3.1: Achieve formal involvement in a graduate program

At this point in time, the Extension Division has no formal involvement with graduate-level teaching and learning. The MSc in Agricultural Extension was discontinued in 2000, and the Extension Division's involvement with the Master of Continuing Education (MCEd) was terminated in the early 1990s. The first step toward integrating graduate teaching and supervision into the practices of Extension faculty members will be to assume a governance and substantive delivery role in a graduate program. At the time of preparing this Action Plan, the Extension Division and the Department of Educational Foundations have developed and jointly endorsed a proposal to revise the MCEd, make the program available through distributed-learning methods, and form a governance and program delivery partnership. Should University Council approve the proposed changes to the MCEd, the Extension Division will focus its graduate teaching and supervision activities on this program.

Action 3.2: Dedicate faculty resources to the program

Since the Extension Division's involvement in a new or revised graduate program will be in a distributed-learning model, the most pressing need for faculty resources is in the instructional design process, specifically, teaching Web-based courses with computer conferencing as the main medium of learner-learner and learner-instructor interaction. Instructional design expertise will be required to: design, produce, and revise courses; orient and coach instructors to teach online; and evaluate the teaching and learning strategies of the program to establish and maintain its position as an innova-

tive and creative program. In addition to the instructional design function, Extension faculty members will need to contribute their substantive expertise to the development and delivery of the program. Courses will need to be developed for delivery at a distance, and these courses will need to be instructed. Graduate students will need supervisors for theses, projects, and practica. Extension faculty members will also serve on various committees to ensure the good governance and administration of the program.

Action 3.3: Focus professional development activities

Since few Extension faculty members have substantial experience teaching and supervising graduate students, faculty development and faculty renewal efforts will need to ensure that they build their capacity to do so in the future. The Extension Division will need to learn from excellent graduate teachers and supervisors at the University of Saskatchewan and from the experiences of other universities that have offered graduate professional education through distributed-learning methods. Through such learning, Extension faculty members will have the opportunity to build their skills and confidence in areas related to the teaching and supervision of graduate students.

4. Developing research infrastructure and supportive administrative processes

Research productivity at the Extension Division is primarily dependent upon the interest and initiative of individual faculty members. Their research productivity can be enhanced through the existence of supportive administrative processes and an enabling research infrastructure. Together, good administration and a solid infrastructure will remove some of the barriers to research productivity and help Extension faculty members to focus on creative and scholarly activities.

Action 4.1: Build awareness of opportunities

It is difficult for any single faculty member to stay abreast of the wide range of opportunities related to research at the Extension Division. Sources of research and program funding emerge and evolve quickly. Numerous conferences and symposia where scholarly and professional presentations are invited take place every year. There are a great number of scholarly and professional journals interested in work being done by Extension faculty members. Promoting awareness of such diverse opportunities is an important component of a coherent research infrastructure at the Extension Division. The Research and Professional Development Committee has created an online conferencing space where information resources will become available. Forthcoming conferences, information and guidelines to authors from

journals, and research funding opportunities will be among the information resources provided through this space.

Action 4.2: Facilitate the more effective sharing of resource materials

Books and journals of use to researchers in adult and continuing education are dispersed across the Extension Division. The Dean's office has a number of journal subscriptions, the Instructional Design Group has a small resource library, and individual faculty members have numerous books and journals on their bookshelves. Many of these resources are not available at the University of Saskatchewan's libraries. Making faculty members aware of the range of materials available within the Extension Division, and facilitating access to such materials, will support our collective research productivity.

Action 4.3: Encourage and support the development of collaborative teams

Individual faculty members can and frequently do work independently to define research questions, gather empirical data, and produce and disseminate knowledge. This craft approach is an important component of research at the Extension Division and should be respected as such. However, there is an emerging awareness that a collaborative or team-based approach to research has a number of potential advantages. Members of teams contribute distinct strengths to the overall capacity of the group, and working as a team can be motivational. Larger research projects are often only possible as a result of collaborative effort.

One means to encourage the development of research teams will be to maintain a current directory of the research interests and activities of Extension faculty members. In addition to this directory, monthly "research round table" reports at faculty meetings will provide further opportunity to build awareness of what various faculty members are doing (and might like to do). Another source of encouragement and support will be the allocation of internal research resources (see *Action 2.6*) to teams taking on coherent and promising projects. Encouragement and support will be provided for teams developing proposals for research grants and contracts and for teams preparing manuscripts for publication.

Action 4.4: Liaise effectively across campus and beyond

The research activities of Extension faculty members are linked to those of other scholars and practitioners at the University of Saskatchewan and elsewhere. The Extension Division will maintain effective contact with such scholars and practitioners in order to enhance its own research productivity and to contribute to larger initiatives. According to their diverse interests, Extension faculty members will interact with colleagues in other colleges and outside the University of Saskatchewan on issues related to research. The Associate Dean (Research) will liaise with the Office of Research

Services and contribute to University of Saskatchewan initiatives, such as the “comprehensive research plan” currently being developed. This individual will also liaise with other universities interested in extension research (e.g., to co-sponsor research meetings, to encourage collaborative research grant proposals, to enhance the networking of researchers).

Action 4.5: Appoint an Associate Dean for Research

In October 2001, the Extension Division appointed an Associate Dean (Research) for the first time. The Associate Dean is responsible for leading the Extension Division’s efforts to intensify its research productivity. This individual has led the development of the current Action Plan and will be responsible for encouraging and monitoring its implementation.

5. Encouraging and celebrating research excellence

The Extension Division will recognize research accomplishments and celebrate the contributions of its faculty members toward such accomplishments. Celebration of achievements is important to maintaining the enthusiasm of individuals and teams, and it encourages people to maintain their commitment to projects that may take years to complete.

Action 5.1: Define indicators of research excellence

The Extension Division is a distinctive unit at the University of Saskatchewan. We have a unique emphasis on extension programming and instructional design as the core activities of our faculty members. We have a distinct focus on the needs and aspirations of communities, organizations, and individuals not taking part in conventional degree-credit instructional processes on campus. The nature of the Extension Division means that publication of peer-reviewed articles in scholarly journals is far from the only indicator of research excellence that is pertinent to the work of its faculty members.

The Extension Division has defined the “outcomes” or “products” that would indicate the accomplishment of research excellence by its faculty members. The Associate Dean (Research) surveyed Extension faculty members with regard to their views on conventional and alternative indicators of research excellence. Based on this consultation, the Associate Dean (Research) will draft a statement about the indicators of successful research that are most relevant to the Extension Division. All Extension faculty members will have the opportunity to contribute to the revision of this draft statement into a working document. The definition of indicators of research excellence will respect the diversity of research outcomes appropriate to research conducted by Extension faculty members, while recognizing the importance of quality in various types of outcomes.

Action 5.2: Document, profile, and celebrate research accomplishments

The Extension Division will produce an annual report outlining the research activities and outcomes of its faculty members. This report will be more than a listing of publications and conference presentations. It will profile specific research projects to which Extension faculty members have contributed significant efforts. It will include scholarly accomplishments related to extension programming and instructional design work. In addition to this annual report, occasional "research days" will be hosted in order to share and showcase research activities of Extension faculty members. Finally, informal celebrations will be hosted in order to recognize the accomplishments of Extension faculty members.

CONCLUSION

The University of Saskatchewan Extension Division developed the Action Plan for Strengthening Research Capacity in order to help create an environment within which Extension faculty members can intensify their research efforts. Ultimately, research productivity is and will continue to be dependent upon the work of individual faculty members. The Action Plan aspires to provide a policy framework that encourages such productivity. Since the plan has been implemented very recently, there is not yet any evidence for its effectiveness. However, publication through the *Canadian Journal for University Continuing Education* provides an opportunity for reflection and dialogue with other continuing education leaders and scholars across Canada.

Such dialogue might involve questions such as: To what extent is the initiative to become more research intensive shared by other continuing education units across Canada? What factors are behind this initiative? Which of the five strategic categories, and the 20 specific actions, would be most (and least) important to other continuing education units? Are there actions, beyond those identified in this article, that other units have found effective in their efforts to enhance research practices? Have other units made similar efforts to design policy frameworks to influence patterns of practice among faculty and staff? If so, what have been the outcomes of such efforts? Dialogue on these and other issues would provide an opportunity to refine and improve the Action Plan presented in this article, and to assess its generalizability to the varied contexts and priorities of other continuing education units across the country.

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BIOGRAPHY

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