



National Urban Research & Extension Center



Urban Extension: tools to build the workforce of tomorrow

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What Is NUREC?

The National Urban Research and Extension Center (NUREC) is a collaborative membership-based nationwide organization for land-grant universities that facilitates the co-creation and application of knowledge; enabling urban communities to improve the health and wellbeing of all residents, achieve equitable economic growth, and steward their natural environments – delivering on the land-grant mission for urban residents, communities and the organizations that support them.

To address our nation's urban challenges, NUREC bridges the gap between community and research by applying the unparalleled power and reach of the land-grant university system, rooted in Extension's community-centered approach.

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Introduction

As urban Extension professionals working in the Tampa Bay area, a growing and densely populated metropolitan region, we found that the typical Extension training, tools, and professional networks did not always fit the realities of the communities we worked with and the large population we served. After years of partnering together on various projects and programs and becoming more involved in the national urban Extension movement, we realized there were no toolkits, trainings, or stand-alone resource guides for urban professionals to support their valuable work across the Extension system. We also found that existing resources in the realm of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) focused on national tools and did

not offer a comprehensive organizational or individual focus for an urban Extension professional. As a result of these discoveries, we began to formulate the concept of an Urban Extension Toolkit (toolkit) to help address the unmet needs of urban Extension professionals. We envisioned a toolkit aimed at empowering urban Extension professionals at all levels, from front-line staff to leadership and administrative roles – one that would also use a DEI lens throughout. This paper will highlight the need for such a toolkit and align our findings with scholarly literature, the context of our work, discuss our theoretical frameworks and models, and explore the competencies needed to be a successful urban Extension professional. Since our work is ongoing, the paper will also describe elements of our future plans for a completed toolkit as we transition from theoretical groundwork and literature reviews to the practical realm of providing hands-on tools in the form of worksheets, models, and assessments. Through this progression, we aim to precisely define both hard and soft skills, enabling the assessment of progress and cultivating the abilities necessary for individuals to become highly effective Extension professionals in urban contexts.

A Competent Urban Extension Workforce

A competent urban Extension workforce is critical to extending university research to address today's complex issues (e.g., affordable housing, poverty, food insecurity, emerging technologies, etc.) in urban areas. However, older models of training the Extension workforce do not always align with current needs. Urban Extension professionals face a different set of challenges than their rural colleagues including large and diverse populations, complex ecosystems of public and private organizations, and navigating the integrated urban-rural interface [1]. These challenges can be difficult to manage using traditional Extension competencies that are based in content area expertise, rely on residents' existing knowledge of Extension as is typical in non-urban areas, and engage with traditional funders and partners of Extension.

Urban Extension professionals need an array of competencies from “soft skills” such as communication, problem solving, organization, and leadership to “hard skills” such as marketing, entrepreneurship, technology, and facilitation. Argabright et al. [2] underscore the need for Extension professionals to possess these skills to create a nimble workforce capable of addressing national and local issues from multiple perspectives and build capacity to support change. Perhaps most importantly, urban Extension professionals must be well-equipped to work with diverse audiences and partners. Diversity, equity, and cultural inclusivity skills are widely-cited as one of the top priorities for urban professionals [1], [3], [4], [5].

Urban Extension Toolkit Vision

When completed, the Urban Extension Toolkit will be broad-based and focused on the urban Extension professional without reference to programmatic discipline. It will offer urban Extension professionals a professional development guide and workbook to help build targeted urban Extension competencies, which are expanded upon in this paper. This "playbook" will provide actions for both professionals and administrators to address urban community challenges, particularly in policy, systems, and environmental change within organizations.

The toolkit will be useful for front-line Extension staff (e.g., educators, agents, program assistants, etc.) as well as administrative professionals and leadership (e.g. Extension Directors, Deans, regional and state staff, etc.), as many could also benefit from a better understanding of urban Extension. The toolkit will be applicable for professionals at any stage of their career working in any program area. While we recognize and emphasize the value of this toolkit for work in primarily urban areas, many of the resources it contains will be applicable across the urban-rural continuum.

The toolkit will include a resource bank of information and provide tangible activities that the user can apply to their work with a goal of increasing their knowledge of their community and the overall urban Extension landscape. Although it will be more activity focused, we will also provide a variety of resources that the user can tap into as well as some literature that will provide education throughout. The toolkit will focus on both practical activities, such as worksheets and journaling alongside strategic planning elements like SWOT analyses, trend analyses, network and community asset mapping, and more. An Extension professional would be able to utilize the worksheets and models we provide to build competencies that will make them a better urban Extension professional. As mentioned previously, all activities will utilize an equity lens.

Literature Review

To understand the landscape of urban Extension, including professional development resources developed for urban Extension professionals, we conducted a literature review. This review included published journals of Extension related to our project, resources about the context of urban Extension, and conceptual models to help us understand our work. Our major findings are outlined below. The section of this paper on “Urban Extension Professional Competencies” and our “Urban Extension Ecosystem” framework were developed as a result of this literature review.

Review of Extension Publications

To find tools or toolkits designed to help urban Extension professionals develop these necessary skills, we conducted a review of articles published in two recognized Extension journals - Journal of Extension (JOE) and Journal of Human Sciences and Extension (JHSE) across a 10-year period, 2012-2022. Table 1 summarizes the search terms and results across both journals; some articles outside the search period were reviewed if the title contained one of the search terms. We characterized the focus of the articles that contained the search term – few focused on the personnel aspect while others were workplace or organizationally focused on coaching and mentoring. When the term “toolkit” was found, it did not focus on professional development for urban Extension.

Table 1. Summary of journal searches, 2010-2022

Search Term	JOE # results	JHSE # results	Brief Summary of Findings
Toolkit	69	17	Toolkits meetings, pesticides, physical activity, finance, obesity, consensus, social media, citizen science, health referral.
DEI	0	1	LGBTQ related
Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (reviewed with focus on competency)	174	6	Inclusion, health, organizational climate, workplace issues, navigating differences, LGBTQ, cultural competency
Urban	500	115	Emphasis on urban Extension programming, few on personnel
Urban professional	367	69	Emphasis on urban Extension programming, few on personnel
Competency	466	40	Cultural competency, new agents, 4-H, pre-entry
Onboarding	16	11	Valuation, evaluation challenges, admin perspectives, coaching and mentoring
Cultural	567	104	Cultural competency, unique personnel, navigating differences, real colors, cultural immersion

While the need for professional competencies to support Extension work in urban areas is generally acknowledged, there is a scarcity of tools that identify and assess them. Many articles such as one by Argabright et al., [2] recognize “skills, competencies, and attributes” along with “inherent traits” while referencing the “context of Extension work” (p. 4) but do not offer specific ways to improve, assess, or develop those various elements. Others such as Berven et al., [6] have focused on competencies

specifically for new Extension agents while others have focused on subsets of Extension agents e.g., 4-H agents, and proposed new models of staffing to support innovation in the urban arena.

The Urban Extension Context

Urban Extension today is inextricably linked to its rural roots, yet the models employed in the past for rural Extension programs are not well suited for contemporary urban programs. Consequently, it is crucial to understand the specific context within which urban Extension operates. The 2015 report, "A National Framework for Urban Extension," [7] published by the National Urban Extension Leaders (NUEL), delves deeply into this context. While it serves as the foundation for our understanding of urban Extension, the NUEL report is complemented by insights from other more recent resources.

Defining Urban

In 2010, the United States Census Bureau (U.S. Census) identified densely populated census tracts or blocks as urbanized areas (50,000 or more) or urban clusters (2,500 to 50,000) [8]. The U.S. Census also uses Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) and Micropolitan Statistical Areas (μ SAs) to identify geographical regions with high population density and interconnected economic and social activity. MSAs have a population of over 50,000 while μ SAs have a population from 10,000 to 50,000. Rural, by comparison, includes "population, housing and territory not included" in an urban area [8].

NUEL (2019) identifies that "urban" and other terms including city, suburban and metropolitan are used interchangeably in documents but refer primarily to highly populated counties and surrounding areas. [9]. Throughout this paper we will use the word "urban" consistently to describe these densely developed areas based on the U.S. Census Bureau's definition, the term's wider use, and to align with NUEL's preferred terminology.

Rural-Urban Continuum Codes

The rural-urban-rural continuum codes were developed by the USDA to "form a classification scheme that distinguishes metropolitan counties by the population size of their metro area, and nonmetropolitan counties by degree of urbanization and adjacency to a metro area" [10]. Each Census Bureau-designated county or county equivalent is assigned one of nine (9) codes along the continuum. These codes offer Extension professionals the opportunity to research their communities and identify where they reside along the continuum. As many previously rural areas grow, Extension professionals may be surprised to find that their communities are more urban than expected. When these codes are updated in late 2023, urbanization is likely to be further increased in many areas. Extension professionals should gain proficiency with this tool and understand where their communities fall along the continuum.

Urban Extension Professional Networks

Extension professional associations and organizations often provide space to advance urban Extension through funding, research, networking, and professional development. Work conducted by entities such as the NUEL, National Urban Research and Extension Center (NUREC, formerly Western Center for

Metropolitan Extension and Research (WCMER), a group within Epsilon Sigma Phi the Extension Professionals Organization (ESP), and others have focused specifically on urban Extension. For example, the Leading-Edge Dialogues, conducted by WCMER at the 2019 National Urban Extension Conference (<https://metroextension.wsu.edu/2020/04/13/led/>) explored the topic of staffing an urban Extension workforce and identified a number of competencies that would greatly increase the ability of urban Extension professionals to be successful across the urban landscape. The Leading Edge Dialogue Series and other work done by these organizations is part of the context and history of urban Extension and our toolkit project adds to this network of urban Extension professional resources.

NUEL

NUEL is at the forefront of creating professional development resources for urban Extension professionals. Since its inception in 2013, NUEL has worked to “advocate and advance the strategic importance and long-term value of urban Extension” [1]. NUEL’s goals are to prioritize urban Extension, garner administrative support, address urban community needs, and support urban Extension personnel through relevant programs, innovative funding structures, and professional development as articulated in its implementation plan [9]. Work conducted by NUEL has informed much of our toolkit project, and the goals of our project align with NUEL’s goals for urban Extension.

Bridging the Urban-Rural Divide

The interdependence of urban and rural areas, is underscored by the statement that "Complex issues do not stop at rural county lines or a city boundary" [11]. Both regions share common social challenges such as poverty, hunger, housing and homelessness, migration, population growth, and public safety and health [11]. However, the 2015 NUEL report highlights the persistence of the national narrative treating rural and urban issues separately. It contends that a robust urban Extension presence is essential to bridging this disconnect, and fostering stronger connectivity among urban, suburban, and rural communities. Extension should not only draw from its long history of serving communities across the nation, but also develop new strategies to meet the needs of our growing urban populations.

Historical Context of Extension

Extension’s roots run deep in rural America, from the farm and agriculture clubs that started after the Revolutionary War, to the creation of land grant universities in the late 1800’s, and finally to the formalization of Cooperative Extension in 1914 with the Smith Lever Act. At that time, most people in the U.S. lived in rural areas and 30% of the population engaged in farming [12]. Created to bring cutting-edge agricultural research from universities to the farmers and ranchers, Cooperative Extension soon helped introduce new agricultural practices to ensure farmers could meet the needs of a rapidly growing and changing population.

Demographic Shifts

In the last 100 years, both the U.S. and the world have experienced a massive shift in population from predominantly rural to predominantly urban. Today, only 17% of the U.S. population lives in rural areas,

and fewer than 2% are engaged in farming. By 2050, it is expected that two-thirds of the world's population will live in urban areas [13]. In light of these changes and the rapid urbanization trend, it becomes imperative for Cooperative Extension to adapt its long-standing models to remain relevant to each unique urban, suburban, and peri-urban community.

Challenges of Urban Extension Work

Each Extension system, whether established in 1862, 1890, or 1994, is distinct, and the unique challenges faced by each community they serve, contribute to this diversity. Because of the incredible diversity between and among communities, there is no one size fits all model to urban Extension. The evolving landscape of challenges demands a nuanced approach to urban Extension that aligns with the dynamic nature of communities and their specific needs. Much like the turn of the 20th century when Extension was just getting started, we are currently in a time of great change and Extension must adapt to be an effective source of community change in urban areas.

Need for Adaptation

The pursuit of advancing urban Extension work often encounters limitations rooted in the early ideology of Extension. This tension between old and new ideologies becomes apparent in the burgeoning urban agriculture movement. Traditional Extension models primarily focus on large-scale production agriculture, overlooking the much smaller growers commonly found in urban areas. Urban farmers frequently find themselves excluded from the more rural agricultural Extension networks, with limited access to relevant, research-based educational resources locally. This inadvertently leaves urban growers disconnected from local food production and distribution systems, where agriculture extends beyond rural communities. Extension must actively support these urban farmers and bridge the gap between urban and rural agriculture, regardless of the food's origin, while recognizing the interconnected nature of the food system. Such tensions are pervasive across the national Extension system. As articulated in the 2015 NUEL report [7], addressing this tension remains imperative, and a robust urban Extension program has the potential to significantly bridge this gap.

While agriculture remains a vital focus for Extension, the shift in demographics necessitates a reevaluation of entrenched models, including programming, staffing, and funding. To remain relevant to the evolving majority residing in urban areas, Extension must harness the strengths of its historical foundation and construct innovative models tailored to the distinctive needs of the growing urban audience.

Tools for Understanding the Urban Extension Context

To effectively navigate the intricacies of urban context and scale, an urban Extension professional should have access to tools that provide insights into the local working context. The following tools offer a

structured approach to analyzing, interpreting, and adapting to the unique dynamics of urban communities and support the program planning process.

PESTLE Analysis

PESTLE is a tool that supports an analysis of external context factors (political, economic, social, technology, legal, environmental) relevant to a local or regional situation (Table 2). A PESTLE analysis can be used to assess any community but is particularly helpful for identifying many of the complex, and often unseen, factors that affect Extension’s work in urban environments. It also supports strategic planning by assessing long term trends across many sectors.

The PESTLE analysis has evolved from earlier iterations to now include legal and environmental context factors. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development recommends PESTLE for a wide range of business needs - strategic planning, workforce development, marketing and production, and organization change [14]. These “business needs” are similar to that of Extension - the organization must respond to changing situations and develop new products (i.e., programs) that meet the needs of its market consumers (clients). The toolkit will include a PESTLE worksheet to enable urban Extension professionals to provide context for programs and partners.

Table 2. The 6 factors of a PESTLE analysis

Political	Governmental structures, quasi-governmental, representatives (city, county, state), metropolitan organizations, planning councils or other regional bodies with influence
Economic	Cost of living (housing, energy), economic incentives, trends in economic growth
Social	Trends in lifestyle, cultural norms, consumer preferences, population demographics
Technology	Use of technology, influence of technology, AI, communication tools
Legal	MOUs, local rules/regulations
Environmental	Consider existing and proposed impacts

SWOT Analysis

A SWOT (Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis (Table 3) may offer similar organizational insights as the PESTLE but tends to be over-used in the professional setting and does not offer the additional focused analysis on political, legal, technological, and environmental factors.

Table 3. The 4 factors of a SWOT analysis

Strengths	Identify strengths e.g. mission, products, people, skills, positions
Weaknesses	Identify weaknesses e.g. lack of capacity, limited funds
Opportunities	Identify opportunities e.g. technology, partners, locations
Threats	Identify threats e.g. staff turn-over, competition, team dynamics

The toolkit will include a SWOT worksheet to enable urban Extension professionals and administrators to examine each of these four areas and find solutions to issues through the usage of intersectional strategies at each point along the four-step framework.

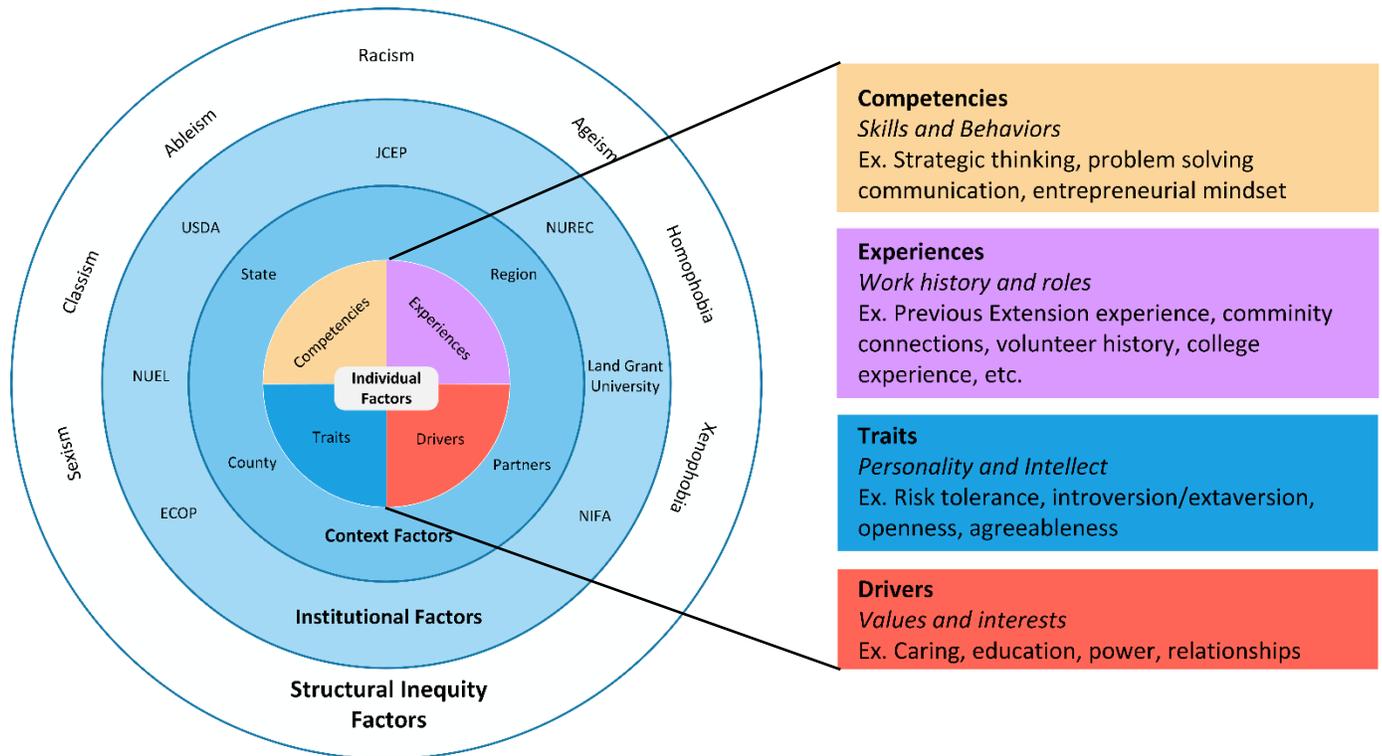
Toolkit Conceptual Framework

We developed a conceptual framework to guide toolkit development and reflect the various influences (internal and external) that impact the work of Extension professionals in the urban context. The conceptual framework is referred to as the *urban extension ecosystem map* and comprises four concentric circles that illustrate the series of factors that impact Extension's work in the urban environment. The multi-layered conceptual map is illustrative of the complexity at each level in the Extension environment.

Urban Extension Ecosystem Map

The conceptual urban Extension ecosystem map (Figure 1) reflects how the urban Extension professional (positioned at the center) is influenced by the activities and impacts of the external environment. In this case, the external environment includes factors of structural inequity, institutional factors from influential groups, and context factors specific to the urban situation (local, county, region).

Figure 1. Contextual ecosystem map for urban Extension professionals and the Korn Ferry Four Dimensions of Leadership and Talent



Structural Inequity Factors

The factors highlighted in the outermost concentric circle reflect the root causes of structural inequity and were informed by the National Framework for Health Equity and Well-Being. Structural inequity factors refer to a systematic disadvantage of one social group compared to other groups that are embedded in the fabric of society, this includes organizations, institutions, governments, or social networks, and refer to race, gender, class, and other domains. The structural inequity factors referenced in the conceptual map include sexism, racism, ableism, classism, homophobia, xenophobia, and ageism. These factors, identified by the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP), are not an exhaustive list but an illustrative list of systemic barriers.

Institutional Factors

Institutional factors relate to external influences that might impact the context and operations of Extension work in urban areas. They may include national and/or international groups, funders, and educational or political groups. The conceptual map highlights the Joint Council of Extension Professionals (JCEP), the umbrella organization for Extension professional associations; National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) which provide funding for Extension activities; and NUEL and NUREC which support urban Extension professionals and activities. Also

included in the institutional realm is *University* referring to the land grant university designation for the Extension professional (1862, 1890, 1994), and ECOP, which is the leadership and governing body for Cooperative Extension operation through land grant universities in partnership with federal, state, and local governments.

Context Factors

Context factors are similar to institutional factors but refer specifically to the urban areas in which Extension professionals operate. In some areas, Extension professionals navigate state, county, region, or parish boundaries. Each of these additional partners or sponsors could support Extension programs through formal or informal arrangements, financial sponsorships, or non-profit alliances. Using tools such as the previously described PESTLE and SWOT analyses can refine which partners may be best suited to expand Extension programs. The complexity and diversity of these partners may be heightened in urban areas relative to socio-economic and demographic factors.

Individual Factors

These factors relate to the individual professional skill set and include observable skills and behaviors that can be used to support personal and professional success. To further investigate the intersection of individual factors within the conceptual map, the toolkit utilizes Korn Ferry's Four Dimensions of Leadership and Talent which was previously identified in personnel work conducted by Dr. Julie Fox. The toolkit focuses on the competency dimension as outlined in the conceptual map to identify the specific needs of Extension professionals in urban areas.

Four Dimensions of Leadership and Talent

The Korn Ferry model uses four dimensions to capture and assess how individuals perform in their roles and contribute to organizational outcomes. The top half of the Korn Ferry four-dimension model identifies "what you do" and includes competencies and experiences; the lower half describes "who you are" and includes traits and drivers. The four domains described in Lewis [13] are useful in predicting "organizational outcomes including...commitment, retention, productivity and leadership potential". *Competencies* are the observable skills and behaviors that contribute to a person's success at work. *Experiences* are the sum of the major work-related events and accomplishments of a person's work history. *Traits* are a person's natural tendencies and abilities, such as personality (e.g., introvert vs. extrovert) and intellect. *Drivers* are the internal values, motivations, and aspirations that influence a person's choices, such as their desire to help others. Together, these dimensions interact and influence each other and help to provide insights into individual success.

Internally, the urban Extension professional is guided and influenced by their own competencies, experiences, traits, and drivers. Since the last three domains are very individualized and influenced by factors outside of a person's control (such as upbringing), the toolkit focuses on competencies which can be influenced by leadership, education, and work experiences and can be strengthened as a person grows in their career. The toolkit will provide recommendations for increasing competencies by

incorporating the context factors described above with competency framework tools from Lewis [13] and other urban Extension personnel development frameworks.

Tools for Assessing the Urban Extension Professional

The complexity and diversity of urban areas require skills beyond those needed in more traditional Extension settings. Most notably, urban Extension work requires a high level of soft skills, e.g. communication and leadership, instead of relying solely on content expertise in their chosen field. This difference needs to be recognized, as it requires administrators to be proactive when recruiting and hiring professionals for these urban and emerging urban areas to ensure success at both the program and community level. Highlighting the difference in skills is not meant to minimize the work done in rural areas, but to help maximize the impact of Extension in urban communities, where we typically have not had the largest presence [1].

To be successful in an urban area, Extension professionals need to understand their current competencies and how they align with the competencies that are a high priority for their personal or community context. The following section outlines how to utilize Korn Ferry's leadership dimensions and persona analysis models proposed by Dr. Fox to assess an urban Extension professional's starting point and, subsequently, identify and prioritize skills needing development.

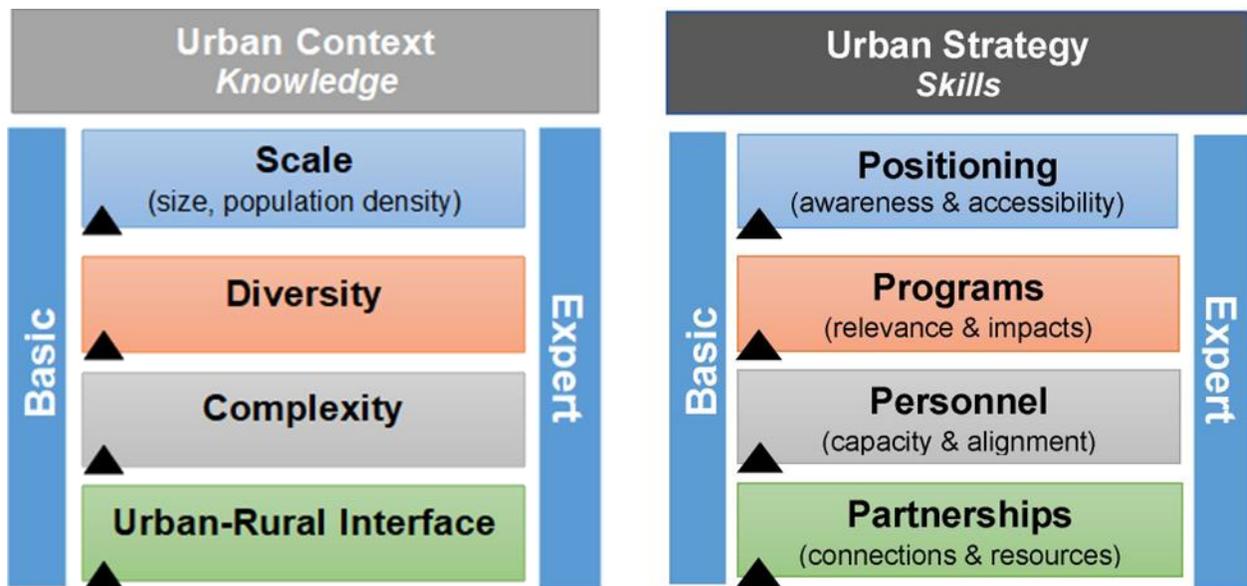
Persona Analysis

Whether you are hiring for an urban area or would simply like to compare your current skill set to those needed for working in urban communities, it is important to understand what an Urban Extension Professional "looks like". Using Korn Ferry's Four Dimensions of Leadership and Talent Model (listed in Figure 1), it is possible to assess where you or your potential hire's skills lie in each of the four domains: Competencies, Experiences, Traits, and Drivers [15]. *Persona analysis and development* is a useful marketing tool that is used to understand customer and/or user experience in a variety of settings. It is one way to determine how customers, in this case Extension professionals, may use the Korn Ferry model in the urban context while aligning it within the NUEL 4P's (Programs, Partnerships, Personnel, and Positioning).

To begin, each Extension professional should complete a Korn Ferry leadership assessment to identify their individual characteristics in each of the four dimensions. For example, a County Extension Director may need different competencies when compared to a County Extension Educator. A County Extension Director may need to be versed in understanding financial statements and community advocacy to maintain local partnerships while a County Extension Educator may need to be versed in navigating and communicating between target audiences within the community. One similarity between these roles may be the need to develop and maintain partnerships for program viability. If the professional lacks skills in a specific domain, it is possible to enhance that domain through training. It is also important to point out that any change in *persona analysis* and placement will affect the outcomes in the community.

Once you have used the Korn Ferry Model to identify the Urban Extension Professional Profile, the “Urban Context Knowledge” and “Urban Strategy Skills” may be applied to plot the necessary knowledge and skill level needed for your particular urban community. The persona analysis model, when used in conjunction with the urban context and strategy charts (Figure 2), can help determine how much skill is needed in each of the four domains to be successful in that context or situational placement. It is also possible to plot a person’s current skill level and compare it the model to assess how much skill building is needed to improve and promote success. Using both models will provide a better picture of an individual’s profile and determine what professional development steps should be taken or recommended to help make a more informed hiring decision and assist in staff retention and training programs. For example, if the community has a very large population with multiple partners and complex issues, it might be more important to have a County Extension Director versed in relationship building that supports positioning and partnerships to promote the visibility of Extension. A County Extension Educator may be more interested in personnel and programs to assist with capacity to deliver relevant programs. Any change in urban context or urban strategy will influence the success of the Extension professional relative to the competency dimension in the leadership assessment.

Figure 2. Urban context and strategy for urban Extension professionals (Credit: J. Fox, Ph.D.)



Urban Extension Professional Competencies

In the realm of professional development, skills and competencies are two distinct yet interconnected concepts. Skills refer to the practical ability to perform specific tasks or activities, often acquired through training or experience. Competencies, on the other hand, encompass a broader set of attributes, including knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes that contribute to effective performance in a particular role or context. Since competencies reflect a more holistic understanding of an individual's capacity to apply their skills in diverse and complex situations, we chose to use the term “competencies”

in this paper. The decision recognizes that effective urban Extension work involves a multifaceted set of qualities beyond specific skills. This approach allows for a more holistic understanding of the complex demands placed on Extension professionals in urban settings.

High Priority Urban Extension Competencies

Using the above-mentioned models and literature reviews we have identified eight high priority competencies necessary for both administrators (county Extension directors, state/regional directors, specialists, etc.) and frontline staff (agent, educators, program assistants, etc.) working in urban Extension (*Table 4*). These competencies should be considered when hiring new personnel and when making professional development plans for current staff. Some of these competencies are not taught in formal Extension or education degree programs, nor do many Extension organizations have built in capacity to develop staff competencies in these areas. Urban Extension leaders should build these into their onboarding programs in order to foster a resilient and agile workforce capable of addressing diverse community needs.

Table 4: Urban Extension professional competencies and their degree of priority for administration and frontline staff

Competencies	Administration	Frontline Staff
<i>Diversity, Equity, Inclusion</i>	High	High
<i>Positioning</i>	High	Not Applicable to Low
<i>Leadership</i>	High	High
<i>Capacity Building</i>	High	High
<i>Entrepreneurship</i>	High	Medium
<i>Program Management and Development</i>	Low	High
<i>Technology</i>	Medium	High
<i>Networking</i>	Medium	High

The following section describes the competencies listed in Table 4. Both administration and frontline staff require some degree of skill in all these areas although there may be differences in how these skills are utilized by each. Skills required for Extension administrators will be relevant at any level from county Extension directors to state program leaders, deans, and middle management positions. The skills required for frontline staff are important whether they work in rural or urban settings, however, there are differences in how these skills are used by urban professionals compared to a more traditional Extension staff.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) competencies have risen in importance in nearly every professional sector and community, particularly since 2020. This skillset goes by many names depending on the context and includes cultural competence, equity, diversity, belonging, inclusivity, multiculturalism, and more. For the purposes of this paper we will define *diversity* as the broad set of skills required to value and celebrate people from a wide array of social identities (i.e. race, religion, sexuality, gender-identity, nationality, (dis)ability, socioeconomic status, etc.); *equity* as promoting justice by tackling the root causes of disparities; and *inclusion* as ensuring all in a space feel welcome and a sense of belonging due to intentionality [16].

This DEI competency area is cited in nearly every urban Extension paper as being a critical requirement for professionals working in these communities. It may also be the highest priority skill set given the rapid diversification of urban areas along the urban-rural continuum and the broad subset of skills that it includes. Megan Dwyer in a recent Forbes article [17] offers seven specific skills that a professional in any context could build: active listening, openness, perspective taking, bridging, systems thinking, assumptions testing, and courage. The Extension Foundation suggests professionals understand implicit bias, develop cultural competency, understand microaggressions, engage in organizational learning, and more. There are, of course, many additional skills that a professional in urban areas could boost in order to build their DEI competencies, and each situation will be unique. That being said, the recommendations above give professionals a good place to start and many overlap with the skills that are discussed later in this paper.

Leaders at all levels play an important role in the promotion of DEI in their Extension organizations. There is only so much an individual can do to improve their competencies in this area, if the context they are in is not conducive to reaching the ideal of a truly diverse, equitable, and inclusive Extension. Hiring managers must be aware of, and potentially adapt, their recruiting practices to ensure they attract a diverse set of qualified candidates. This may include looking beyond the usual pool of Extension candidates with master's degrees from Land Grant Universities and/or familial ties to Extension and agriculture, changing the required qualifications to be inclusive of a variety of education and experience levels outside of a formal degree, and advertising openings using word of mouth or other methods to the communities where Extension programs are offered. Many of the "hard skills" that Extension requires can easily be acquired after hiring, but hiring someone with a deep understanding of the community they will be working in is a rare and invaluable quality in urban Extension work.

Extension leaders and administration could make lasting change in their organizational culture by studying change theories such as Multicultural Organization Development [18]. This and other similar models of change which use a DEI lens guide organizations through a process to become more equitable to all cultures and backgrounds, making the organization more inclusive and welcoming to not only staff, but also to the program participants that benefit from a multicultural organization.

Positioning

Positioning is a competency that is primarily required for Extension professionals at and above the director level. Many people may be familiar with positioning as a marketing term that indicates where your product stands in relation to others in the market. In the context of Extension, it is used slightly differently being that the “product” is Extension. However, Extension leaders need to understand that urban Extension holds a much different position in its market than more traditional Extension does. Whereas traditional Extension has done an excellent job of positioning and finding its niche in agriculture education, urban Extension must position itself so that it is not left behind in an ever-growing sea of competitors. The urban pressures of limited funding sources and larger population sizes increases the need for leaders to understand positioning and repositioning [19]. An urban Extension leader must market their “products” whether that be programs, locations, financial resources, etc. to a larger, more diverse audience that may not have had much connection to Extension. This requires leaders to be strategic in planning where they hold programs, how messaging is done (e.g. in multiple languages or using grass roots connections), and how they attract new donors and volunteers to find a unique niche in their urban communities [9] and guiding their personnel to do the same. Urban Extension’s unique niche is highly dependent on the individual community and how responsive Extension leaders are to these diverse community needs. Regional, state, and national Extension administration must also position their urban Extension programs, policies, and initiatives in much the same way as local Extension leaders, so this competency is relevant to all levels of urban Extension administrators.

Leadership

An Extension professional in any location or level of their career will need to utilize the many skills required for effective leadership. However, professionals in urban areas may be more effective when providing leadership as a facilitator and guide, rather than as a content matter expert with all of the answers. Due to the complicated nature of urban programs and problems, professionals in these areas ought to lean heavily into the servant leadership model which holds the needs, wants, and values of the people being led above all else. Consequently, urban Extension leaders must possess robust “soft skills,” a prerequisite applicable to all staff, from educators and directors to administrators.

The servant leadership competency, and leadership in general, requires a combination of skills that include emotional intelligence, facilitation, innovation, creativity and more. In “The Leadership Challenge” [20], Posner and Kouzes outline “Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership”, which include modeling, inspiring, building teams, valuing teams, and challenging the status quo. These five broad categories are easy to understand and provide a great starting point for new leaders to develop their skills. Leaders that truly live and model their values, and work hard to serve their teams, will see the benefits. Teams that

have a leader who values, challenges, and respects them will outperform those with a leader who is simply managing tasks, making these soft skills essential components of urban Extension professional development.

Capacity Building

Capacity building, as defined by the Council of Nonprofits, encompasses the holistic process required to elevate a nonprofit organization to the next level of operational, programmatic, financial, or organizational maturity. It is a continual endeavor aimed at enhancing effectiveness and efficiency in advancing the organization's mission sustainably [21]. In Extension, administrators play a pivotal role, akin to CEOs, whether at the county, state, university, or other levels.

Identifying and addressing gaps in professional development strategies for urban professionals is imperative and should be integrated into strategic planning efforts. Administrators are encouraged to employ various organizational assessments, adapted as necessary for Extension, and encourage self-assessments among staff to pinpoint organizational deficiencies. These assessments can be tailored to specific programs, urban versus rural contexts, or any other pertinent perspective aligned with organizational objectives. Administrators must be adaptable, educating themselves on diverse models and needs, to cater to all stakeholders effectively.

Frontline Extension professionals similarly operate as program CEOs, overseeing various aspects of program management, including marketing, fundraising, programming, and occasionally staffing. Their influence on capacity is significant, contingent upon external and situational factors outlined in the "Ecosystem Model" (Figure 1). To build capacity, a staff person must consider the ecosystem they reside in by performing self and organizational assessments to establish a baseline. (A great list of assessments can be found here linked via the Council of Nonprofits: <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources/organizational-self-assessments>). Once a baseline is established, the Extension program "CEO" should formulate goals aligned with the program's mission and vision through research and community input. Crafting a strategic plan with specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) objectives, encompassing resources, marketing strategies, programmatic adjustments, and succession plans, is crucial. Both new and seasoned Extension professionals should pursue training in strategic planning, financial management, and marketing to ensure program longevity.

Networking is another vital aspect of capacity building, discussed further in subsequent sections [22]. Given Extension's limitations in internal staffing and volunteer capacity, forging connections with like-minded organizations enriches the capacity of all parties involved in a mutually beneficial way.

Entrepreneurship

The Leading-Edge Dialogue, mentioned in the literature review, included "entrepreneurial mindset" [1], a concept also discussed by Argabright et al. (2019), as a priority of urban Extension professionals. Much like capacity building above, entrepreneurship skills are often overlooked in Extension, but should be a priority for both administrators and frontline staff in urban areas. Developing an entrepreneurial mindset includes a broad set of skills that differ depending on the source, but often include: (a) creativity/problem

solving, (b) thirst for knowledge, (c) drive/grit, (d) overcoming and learning from mistakes, (e) focus, (f) always searching for opportunity/innovation, (g) big picture thinking/future oriented, and (h) communication. There are many other skills that could be included, but these are often cited among leaders in this field [23]. Extension is often years behind the culture, and the pandemic has changed the culture of how people work. Entrepreneurial skills can help Extension leaders predict upcoming trends, new ways of working, or a new programming niche. Employees with entrepreneurial skills will benefit the entire Extension system, as people with this mindset can help lead Extension into the 21st century and beyond.

Program Management and Development

Program management and development skills are a priority in Extension regardless of where the community lies on the rural-urban continuum, and regardless of a person's level of leadership in the organization. Many staff come into Extension with at least a basic understanding of this skillset and/or are offered extensive training after being hired. However, developing a strong Extension program in urban communities is different due to the complexities and challenges that they present. Despite the challenges, urban professionals can often outsource certain aspects of the program development process, such as using city needs assessment data or partner organization speakers, compared to a rural professional who may have to plan and conduct all aspects of a program.

Program development and management competencies encompass the entire program development process, from needs assessment to evaluation [24]. A critical piece of building these skills is understanding exactly what an Extension program is - the sum total of all the resources (staff time, money, community involvement, etc.), activities (classes, field days, fact sheets, etc.), and more that are used to address a community need [25]. All of these individual skills should be built into an Extension staff's onboarding and continuing education. Evaluation, teaching, and facilitation, are three critical parts of the program management and development process in Extension, but there are many more.

Major programs – those that consist of multiple, time-intensive activities, planning, evaluation, and reassessment - are often the focus of multi-year or even career-spanning efforts to address a community issue like access to food, health, youth development, etc. Extension professionals should utilize a logic model (or similar) when planning a major program, to determine how each of these pieces fit together and to assess which areas of the program may need strengthening. Staff should be able to visualize any barriers, identify professional competencies they may need to strengthen, and determine where partners and other capacity building activities could increase the impact of the major program.

Technology

It should go without saying that technology skills are required for an Extension professional. Technology is an ever-present part of today's working world, and particularly important in fiercely competitive urban areas. Many audiences (particularly the younger generations) in urban areas have grown accustomed to accessing education through mediums like Zoom, TikTok, Facebook, and others. Both frontline staff and administration need to understand technology in order to stay relevant to their audiences, deliver content on audiences' preferred information mediums, and market to new audiences. Distance learning

opportunities expand Extension's reach to previously unimaginable places. The Extension Foundation, NIFA, and many land grant universities are already spending a great deal of money researching technologies and engineering concepts that could change the way we all live. As these technologies (e.g., automation, artificial intelligence, smart homes, and more) reach into every aspect of our lives, Extension should ensure that its workforce has some basic technology skills and the willingness to learn in order to stay relevant.

Networking

Networking competency is a high priority for urban Extension professionals due to the intricate web of stakeholders and diverse communities they engage with in urban settings. Effective networking enables professionals to forge strategic partnerships, access valuable resources, and leverage collective expertise to address complex urban challenges. In urban environments, where collaboration and interdisciplinary approaches are often essential, networking facilitates the exchange of knowledge, fosters innovation, and enhances the reach and impact of Extension initiatives. By cultivating strong networks, urban Extension professionals can bridge gaps between communities, government agencies, non-profit organizations, and academic institutions, thereby facilitating the co-creation of solutions that are responsive to the needs of urban populations.

Urban Extension Professional Networks

Beyond networking within their programs, Extension professionals should also seek to cultivate a network of professional support, both within and outside of traditional Extension professional organizations. Many urban areas have extensive networks of professionals that work alongside and often with Extension. Whether these organizations offer professional development or grass roots access to the community, a savvy Extension professional should be involved in a few local organizations or coalitions to grow their network and capacity. Some examples may include the Urban League, local Rotary Clubs, topic-focused strategy groups (such as food policy councils), and parks or library collectives. Many times, Extension finds new partnerships and increased visibility as a result of being involved in these local organizations.

An urban Extension professional should research which of their national professional development organizations have a focus on urban work. Organizations such as NUEL, NUREC, Epsilon Sigma Phi, and National Association of Extension 4-H Youth Development Professionals (NAE4-HYDP) either focus on urban work or have dedicated work groups for urban audiences. They offer vast national networks that offer tremendous value and mentorship to Extension professionals at any stage of their career.

Finding other professional networks, outside of Extension, can give the urban professional a fresh lens through which to view their work while connecting them with other organizations to help build their competencies. Many nonprofits (e.g., the National Council of Nonprofits, mentioned above), community development, and child welfare organizations also have extensive and relevant resources. Urban Extension work often relies on personal connections and resources found in unconventional ways, and participating in these local, state, or national organizations can open new doors and amplify program impacts.

Next Steps

The literature reviews, conceptual framework development, and research outlined in this paper have laid the groundwork for the development of the toolkit itself. The next phase of our project, currently in progress, includes a needs assessment. We have already deployed a survey to gather data about the competencies essential for urban Extension professionals and administrators. This data, alongside the research from phase one, will form the basis for the toolkit's development.

Although completing a fully developed toolkit is beyond the scope of our current NUREC fellowship and funding, we hope to continue this work. Our next steps include creating an outline of the toolkit, soliciting contributors, drafting the toolkit, and presenting our data at conferences. After an initial review phase, the draft toolkit will pave the way for additional resources, including webinars. The finalized toolkit will move this project from a theoretical frame to a practical, hands-on application which can be deployed through the National Urban Extension Leaders (NUEL) network, and other networks across the Extension system, to support professional development skills for urban Extension professionals.

This paper recognizes the challenges prevalent in urban areas which impact the success of urban Extension professionals and highlights the opportunities for Extension professionals to hone their professional skillset using tools to be included in the Urban Extension Toolkit. We believe that urban Extension professionals can enhance their personal and professional competencies and operate successfully within the confines of multiple systemic frames (structural, institutional, context, urban) when provided with adequate training, access to resources, and networks that support their professional development.

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