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MSU Extension continues efforts to focus programs, serve communities

Since early 2009 MSU Extension has been working to focus its programming efforts to more effectively use its resources and provide vital educational resources to Michigan communities.

That effort resulted in the streamlining of administrative functions into 13 district offices and maintained programming staff to serve every Michigan community.

“From the beginning, as we’ve looked at how to realign our organization to improve efficiency, our first thought has always been that we need to continue to offer university resources that are also responsive to our county partners’ needs,” said Michelle Rodgers, MSU Extension associate director.

Through a series of town hall meetings over the past year, MSU Extension leaders explored what county government officials need from the organization. The findings from that effort showed that county government partners support MSU Extension’s need to change and its continuing local presence across the state. They expect MSU Extension to offer programs tied to agriculture and 4-H youth development, and also value agriculture-tourism, community development, land use, economic development, nutrition and health.

“Though we might be changing the way we interact with partners in county government, we’ll remain true to our core values of sharing MSU’s unbiased, research-driven resources to make a difference to Michigan’s communities, families, young people and businesses,” Rodgers said.

Realigned programming reflects focus in key arenas

MSU Extension staff members across the state and the campus have also worked with stakeholders in a number of areas to identify the most important topics upon which to focus efforts to contribute to helping strengthen and advance Michigan into a stronger, brighter future.

This effort resulted in establishment of four program institutes. The institutes and their directors are:

- Greening Michigan: Leveraging Natural and Human Assets for Prosperity--Rick Foster
- Enhancing Michigan’s First Green Industry: Agriculture and Agribusiness--Wendy Powers
- Preparing Michigan’s Children & Youth for the Future--Julie Chapin
- Improving Health and Nutrition for Michigan residents--Dawn Contreras

Within these institutes educators based across Michigan will interact with MSU campus-based specialists to develop programs intended to meet Michiganians’ most pressing needs.

Workgroups have been organized within each institute to strategically address issues. The workgroups are cross-disciplinary and comprise MSU Extension educators from across the state. The teams develop short-, medium- and long-range plans for addressing issues that include regular evaluations to ensure that they are staying on track and are connected to measureable goals.

To see an organizational chart with the institutes and the workgroups, visit www.msue.msu.edu.

Youth gardens grow the future

“We need to grow more stuff!” an enthusiastic teenager said after her first experience successfully selling produce at a farm stand. She was one of nearly 160 young people who participated in the 2010 **4-H Youth Gardens & Farm Stands project**. Through this unique program, young people have been able to explore the concepts of entrepreneurship and local foods in a variety of ways.

The process of choosing which vegetables to plant included discussions about the Michigan climate and products that can be locally-grown. The experience of selling produce at a youth farm stand exposed participants to the concept of market forces, as they could assess the relative popularity of different produce items and discuss purchase preferences with local consumers.

These preferences included the freshness of locally-grown vegetables and fruits, due to the reduction in transport time from garden to market. Young people utilized this concept in their marketing plans, emphasizing that their produce had been harvested the same day that it was made available for sale.

By the end of the growing season, new youth gardens had been established at **Tollgate Farm in Novi** and the **Baldwin Center in Pontiac**. The participants were so enthusiastic about their experiences that hoop houses were constructed at both sites to allow the program to continue throughout the colder months.

In a survey of the young people, more than three-quarters said they felt it was worth their time and effort to grow some of their own food. Considering that 40% of the Pontiac participants had never planted a garden prior to their experience in the **4-H Youth Gardens & Farm Stands project**, that attitudinal measure is an impressive accomplishment.



Summer program participants plant seeds at the Baldwin Center.

The success of a local food source is contingent upon young people building the knowledge and skills to successfully grow edible produce in their communities. Through the experience of gardening throughout the summer season, **young people gained new knowledge** about:

- The basics of planting
- How plants grow
- Composting rules
- Harvesting techniques
- The importance of weeding

This knowledge was demonstrated during post-activity discussions, on written surveys, and via the effective techniques that youth utilized in the garden.

Nutrition lessons were a complementary part of the learning process, not only to encourage healthy eating habits among the young participants, but also to equip them with information that they could share with their customers at the farm stand. The connection between the nutrition activities and local foods was reinforced by sampling produce in the garden.

The hands-on design of the farm stand project further developed the participants' understanding of local food systems. In addition to gaining experience at farmers' markets and farm-based retailing enterprises, these **entrepreneurial activities** ensured that teens gained skills in:

- Marketing products through effective displays
- Customer service and communication
- Financial accounting
- Inventory tracking

Most importantly, the new **gardens helped build communities**, as parents and neighbors gained the benefits of access to fresh produce. They supported young people by purchasing their harvest, embracing the garden as a valuable community asset, and giving kids a great reason to “grow more stuff.”

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