

## PROGRAMS VIEWED IMPORTANT FOR PENN STATE COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Penn State Cooperative Extension has been delivering educational programs to residents of Pennsylvania for nearly 100 years as part of the land-grant mission of the University. Cooperative Extension links University faculty with field-based extension educators and volunteers in each of the state's 67 counties to provide unbiased research-based information to citizens throughout the Commonwealth. County educators work with local residents to identify local needs and, based on this information, statewide programs are developed to assist field staff activities directed to meeting these needs. Conference, workshops, demonstrations, publications, informational meetings, and one-on-one contacts are devised to disseminate the information to constituents. It is estimated that one in every six Pennsylvania households has used the services of Cooperative Extension in the past two years.

As a continuing effort to learn more about the issues that are of concern to Pennsylvanians, and the educational topics they see as important for extension to address, a section in the Citizen's Viewpoint survey, asked residents to indicate how important each of a series of various educational topics was areas for Cooperative Extension to address. Specifically, the question asked:

*Penn State conducts numerous extension/outreach programs for citizens of Pennsylvania. Indicate how important you believe each of the following is as an area of needed education. Use a scale, of "1" to "5" where "1" means NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT and "5" means VERY IMPORTANT.*

The question was followed by a listing of five to eight specific topics in each of six program areas: 1) *Children and Youth (including 4-H)*; 2) *Natural Resources*; 3) *Health, Nutrition, and Food Safety*; 4) *Family and Home*; ; 5) *Community Affairs and Decision-Making*; and 6) *Agriculture*.

Four topics were given importance ratings of "4" or "5" by three-fourths or more of those responding:

- Prevention of drug and alcohol abuse among youth and children (80%)
- Prevention of water pollution (80%)
- Pregnancy prevention among teenagers (79%)
- Safe food handling in restaurants and institutions (76%).

Moreover, of the 40 topics presented, 35 were considered “important” or “very important” (ratings of “4” or “5” on the importance scale) by more than 50 percent of the subjects responding. For such large proportions of people to judge so many of these educational topics as “important” or “very important” speaks to the relevance of the Cooperative Extension programs being offered throughout the state of Pennsylvania. In the discussion which follows, the six program areas will be described separately. [Table 1 at the end of this paper presents the distributions of responses for all items.]

### ***Children and Youth (including 4-H)***

Two of the issues rated as important by more than 75% of the respondents were concerned with programming directed to young people: drug and alcohol abuse prevention and pregnancy prevention. Indeed, all of the topic areas included in the section on *Children and Youth (including 4-H)*, were rated by more than seven out of ten persons as “4” or “5” on the importance scale. These included (in addition to the items listed above): Life skills education (72%), smoking prevention (72%), and career exploration (70%). Specialized programs dealing with adolescent pregnancy prevention and prevention of substance abuse (including smoking) are part of the outreach activities of the College of Agricultural Sciences. Cooperative Extension’s 4-H and other youth development programs focus on teaching young people how to make effective decisions and the importance of being responsible for their actions. Contemporary youth programming addresses real life issues with which youth are confronted and helps them understand the implications of their actions. The foundation of 4-H is developing life skills through hands-on educational experiences in project work. Career exploration is a natural outgrowth of these activities as youth explore personal interests, acquire skills, and gain leadership experiences.

### ***Natural Resources***

Programming in *Natural Resources* was viewed by the majority of respondents as important, with (as noted above) more than 80% indicating importance ratings of “4” or “5” for programs dealing with water pollution. Ensuring a quality water supply is critical to residents of the state, and extension programs address this issue through community-based programming initiatives, work with citizen groups, and individuals. Programs in nutrient management and integrated pest management teach farmers the importance of controlling the amount and kinds of manure, fertilizers and pesticides to use in crop production. Other topics and the proportion of persons giving “4” or “5” importance ratings were as follows:

- Energy conservation (74%)
- Farmland preservation (71%)
- Protecting the environment (70%)
- Solid waste reduction (67%)
- Conservation of wildlife habitat and endangered species (61%)
- Stewardship of private woodlands (52%)

Cooperative Extension's environmental education and conservation programs directed to adults and youth focus on the protection of wildlife and forest resources, the conservation of energy, environmentally sound farming and forestry practices. Work with community groups and local decision-makers provides assistance in defining and resolving issues associated with land usage and environmental concerns. Cooperative Extension has been a leader in collaborating with community groups to address local environmental problems and to help residents become good stewards of the natural resources they own and/or use.

### ***Health, Nutrition, and Food Safety***

Topics related to *Health, Nutrition, and Food Safety* were viewed as of great importance by a substantial majority of respondents. The largest proportion of "4" or "5" rankings in this area (76%) was for programs to assure safe handling of food in restaurants and institutional settings. This item ranked fourth among the list of all 40 topics presented. A major program initiative of Cooperative Extension and Penn State Outreach partner, Continuing Education, has been to develop and deliver educational programs for food service providers on safe food handling practices. A program (called "ServSafe") helps food service providers become certified in order to meet legislation to assure a safe food system. Other topics related to health, nutrition, and food safety were also widely seen as important, with the following percentages of respondents rating them as "4" or "5" on the importance scale:

- Coping with chronic disease (72%)
- Healthy lifestyles (exercise, smoking, health, etc.) (70%)
- Topics related to aging (care, health, housing, etc.) (66%)
- Nutrition and diet (62%)
- Food safe handling in the home (56%)

Coping with chronic illness is not only a medical issue, but a social one as well. Cooperative Extension programs dealing with family relations, education for caregivers, and information on available community resources contribute to the well-being of chronically ill citizens. Food borne illnesses from E.Coli, Salmonella, and other sources have become major public concerns. Educational programs alerting the public concerning valid food safety issues and providing guidance for safe practices in the selection, storage, and preparation of foods are important and longstanding elements of the programming carried out by Cooperative Extension. Many extension programs focus on healthier eating for staying fit, safe food practices at home and on the go, and the importance of an overall balanced diet. The Expanded Food and Nutrition Education program (EFNEP) has been reaching low income and underserved audiences for over thirty years, teaching people on limited incomes how to stretch their food dollars and yet prepare nutritious meals for their families.

### ***Family and Home***

The topics included under the title of *Family and Home* varied in the extent to which they were judged to be highly important areas for Cooperative Extension programming,

although all but one had half or more of the respondents giving “4” or “5” ratings on the importance scale.

- Training for nursing home workers (72%)
- Health insurance options (69%)
- Training for child care providers (66%)
- Parenting programs (60%)
- Family financial management (55%)
- Family communications (54%)
- Proper home use of pesticides/fertilizers (50%)
- Home gardening (38%)

A sizable majority reported that education of nursing home and childcare workers were very important topics. Programs related to both of these concerns are part of the offerings of Cooperative Extension in the state. Training of nursing home workers is a part of Cooperative Extension’s activities in a number of counties. “Better Kid Care” has provided training for childcare workers for more than a decade, and contributed to the certification and understanding of countless childcare providers. Educational offerings concerning how to understand and evaluate health insurance options, family financial management, family communication and parenting topics are covered in a variety of family and consumer education programs conducted for the general public and targeted audiences such as families with young children and the elderly. Cooperative Extension programs strive to help people to understand their options so they can make sound decisions in relation to their family’s well-being. Concern for education relating to home use of pesticides and fertilizers reflected environmental and safety issues and, perhaps yard and garden maintenance. The item dealing directly with home gardening (soil testing, pest/disease control, plant varieties) received high importance ratings from only 38% of the subjects. This relatively low percentage was somewhat surprising given the increasing popularity of home gardening for recreation, property beautification, and food. Cooperative Extension has long been looked to for information to help home gardeners, and this continues to be a major reason why people contact their county extension office for information.

### ***Community Affairs and Decision-making***

The area of programming termed *Community Affairs and Decision-Making* is related to a number of the previously enumerated topics. Local initiatives to address many of the above social concerns (teen pregnancy, safe food, land use, natural resource protection, etc.), as well as community development efforts, and management issues dealing with finances, and leadership are all included in community affairs programming. A majority of citizens saw educational efforts in these areas as important, and gave them rating of “4” or “5” on the importance scale.

- Public finance/tax reform (64%)
- Training of local government officials (60%)
- Land use planning (57%)

- Business management skills (51%)
- Community economic development (50%)
- Community leadership skill development (48%)
- Understanding and managing social change (48%)
- Volunteer skill development (42%)

### ***Agriculture***

Despite the fact that only about 5% of the respondents to the Citizens' Viewpoint survey were farmers, subjects recognized the importance of the educational programming of Cooperative Extension related to *Agriculture*. Production, management, marketing, and processing of farm and forestry products were all regarded as important topics by a majority of the respondents, with between 55 and 65 percent of all subjects rating these items as "4" or "5" on the importance scale.

- Crop production (64%)
- Marketing farm products (61%)
- Livestock production (60%)
- Processing/distribution of agricultural products (59%)
- Farm financial management (59%)
- Commercial timber management (55%)

From its earliest days, Cooperative Extension has been engaged in educational efforts to carry the findings of scientific agricultural research to farmers and to increasing production, enhance profitability, and improve the well-being of farmers and farm families. Programming in these areas remains a major emphasis in Cooperative Extension today.

### ***Residential Differences in Importance Ratings***

Cooperative Extension was begun nearly a century ago to serve the special needs of farmers and rural families. While efforts were initially focused on improving production agriculture, recognition of the importance of also building healthy families and communities in rural areas led to the early development of programs directed to youth, families, local leaders, and the citizenry. Today, in addition to continuing its mission to farmers and rural people, Cooperative Extension programming is directed to people throughout the Commonwealth, including those living in urban and suburban settings as well as its traditional rural clientele. Because of its rural and agricultural origins, however, some people may assume that Cooperative Extension's programming addresses primarily the needs of rural citizens. Are the types of programs that are the focus of extension's efforts viewed as important by Pennsylvanians living in urban and suburban areas as well?

To address this question, the responses of rural, suburban, and urban residents to the various programming areas were compared. Place of residence was determined by the subjects' response to the question "How would you describe your current residence?"

(response categories were: 1) Large city; 2) Medium-sized city; 3) Small city; 4) Rural town or village; and 5) In the country.

For the analysis that follows, “urban” residents were defined as those who reported that they lived in a large, medium-sized, or small city; “rural” residents were those who reported living in the country or a rural town or village; “suburban” was treated as a separate category. [Table 2 at the end of the report shows the data.]

For 13 of the 40 program topics, there were no statistically significant differences among rural, suburban, and urban residents in the proportion who gave the topic “4” or “5” ratings on the importance scale. These included all five of the *Children and Youth* topics (combating drug and alcohol abuse, pregnancy prevention, life skills development, smoking prevention, and career exploration), two of the *Health, Nutrition and Food Safety* topics (safe food handling in restaurants and institutions, and coping with chronic illness), four topics in the area of *Natural Resources* (preventing water pollution, energy conservation, protecting the environment, and solid waste reduction), and two in *Community Affairs and Decision-making* (public finance/tax reform and training local government officials).

Rural residents were more likely than their suburban or urban counterparts to give high importance ratings to the six topics dealing directly with *Agriculture*, the single item dealing with home gardening, and the *Natural Resource* item on farmland preservation. Suburban residents were the least likely to attribute high importance ratings to these topics, but only in the case of home gardening did even the proportion of suburban give less than a 50% endorsement of the topic’s high importance. More than two-thirds indicated that farmland preservation was important. Rural and suburban residents were somewhat more likely than those living in urban areas to rate land use planning as a topic of high importance.

There was little difference between rural and urban residents’ responses to the items dealing with conservation of wildlife habitats and private woodland management, although suburban residents were less likely to view these as important program topics.

For the remaining sixteen topic areas, there were statistically significant differences among the residence groupings in the proportion of respondents rating the topics as highly important. While none of the differences were large, urban residents were the most likely to give these topics high importance ratings. Included here were programs dealing with healthy lifestyles, aging, nutrition, safe food handling in the home, parenting, training childcare providers and nursing home workers, family financial management, family communication, health insurance options, safe home use of pesticides, community leadership skill development, volunteer skill development, community business management, and understanding/managing community change.

## ***Conclusions***

Cooperative Extension education programs dealing with children and youth, natural resources, health, nutrition/ food safety, home and family, community affairs/decision-making, and agriculture are directed to individuals, families, and communities throughout the Commonwealth. They provide “close to home” opportunities for citizens to increase their skills and knowledge in areas that impact on their everyday lives. The overwhelming percentage of respondents who indicated that these programs dealt with topics of importance to them underscores the current relevance of the Cooperative Extension programs being planned and conducted in the Commonwealth.

Moreover, regardless of the type of area in which Pennsylvanians live (rural, suburban, or urban), they are likely to view the educational topics addressed by Cooperative Extension as highly important. Apart from expected differences in topics directly related to farming and farmlands, rural residents were not more likely than urban or suburban dwellers to give higher importance ratings to the topics addressed. In fact, when differences among rural, urban, and suburban people were found, they were generally small, with urban residents often the *most* likely to give high importance ratings to the programming areas addresses by Cooperative Extension.

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Table 1. Importance ratings<sup>a</sup> for specific topics in six Cooperative Extension program areas.

Program Area and Topic	Number of Cases	Rating		
		Important (5 + 4)	Mid-value (3)	Not Important (2 or 1)
-----Percent-----				
<b>Children and Youth</b>				
Drug & alcohol abuse prevention	4084	80.5	12.4	7.0
Pregnancy prevention	4045	78.7	13.0	8.4
Life skills education	4044	72.2	21.4	6.4
Smoking prevention	4064	71.9	16.1	12.0
Career exploration for youth	4079	70.1	23.0	6.9
<b>Natural Resources</b>				
Prevention of water pollution	4050	79.6	16.0	4.4
Energy Conservation	4058	73.7	20.4	5.9
Farmland preservation	4055	71.4	21.3	7.3
Protecting the environment	4042	70.4	21.8	7.7
Solid waste reduction	4057	67.3	24.0	8.6
Conservation of wildlife habitat/endangered species	4033	61.3	25.5	13.2
Stewardship of private woodlands	4024	51.6	31.2	17.2
<b>Health, Nutrition, and Food Safety</b>				
Safe food handling in restaurants/institutions	4049	75.8	18.9	6.2
Coping with chronic disease	4019	71.7	22.8	5.5
Healthy lifestyles (exercise, smoking, health)	4058	70.3	21.9	7.7
Topics related to aging (housing, care, health)	4053	66.5	25.8	7.7
Nutrition and diet	4050	61.6	29.1	9.2
Safe food handling in the home	4069	55.6	30.0	14.4
<b>Family and Home</b>				
Training for nursing home workers	4051	72.1	21.5	6.4
Health insurance options (Medicare, long-term care, etc.)	4066	69.3	21.6	9.0
Training for child care providers	4053	66.3	24.2	9.5
Parenting programs (infant care, child development)	4008	59.9	28.4	11.7
Family financial management	4051	55.0	29.8	15.2
Family communication	4025	54.0	30.2	15.8
Proper home use of pesticides/fertilizers	4071	50.3	29.8	19.9

Program Area and Topic	Number of Cases	Rating		
		Important (5 + 4)	Mid-value (3)	Not Important (2 or 1)
		-----Percent-----		
Home gardening (soil testing, pest/disease control, etc.)	4074	38.3	34.9	26.8
Community Affairs and Decision-Making				
Public finance/tax reform	4032	64.6	25.3	10.1
Training of local government officials	4023	60.3	27.3	12.4
Land use planning	4016	56.9	30.4	12.7
Business management skills	4016	50.8	35.6	13.7
Community economic development	4042	49.5	37.0	13.5
Community leadership skills development	4004	48.2	36.5	15.3
Understanding/managing community change	4045	48.0	36.1	15.9
Volunteer skills development	4038	42.1	38.0	19.9
Agriculture				
Crop production	3994	63.6	28.2	8.2
Marketing farm products	3990	60.9	28.9	10.3
Livestock production	3995	60.3	30.3	9.5
Processing/distribution of agricultural products	3998	59.4	30.4	10.2
Farm financial management	3941	59.2	29.9	10.9
Commercial timber management	3988	55.3	31.0	13.8

<sup>a</sup>Respondents rated each topic on a scale from “5” (very important) to “1” (not important). For this analysis, ratings of “4” and “5” are combined and called “Important;” ratings of “1” and “2” are combined to mean “Not important;” the mid-value (“3”) is retained as a separate category.

Table 2. Residential differences in the “importance ratings” of specific Extension program topics.

Program Area and Topic	Residence			sig
	Urban	Suburban	Rural	
	-----% Important-----			
<b>Children and Youth</b>				
Drug & alcohol abuse prevention	80.3	78.8	81.2	.583
Pregnancy prevention	78.3	77.4	79.1	.635
Life skills education	71.7	70.7	73.1	.076
Smoking prevention	73.1	71.1	71.0	.470
Career exploration for youth	68.5	71.0	69.5	.156
<b>Natural Resources</b>				
Prevention of water pollution	81.8	78.6	78.6	.171
Energy Conservation	76.3	71.4	73.0	.073
Farmland preservation	69.8	67.2	76.2	.000*
Protecting the environment	71.9	71.5	68.2	.070
Solid waste reduction	68.1	67.9	65.6	.336
Conservation of wildlife habitat/endangered species	62.2	59.3	62.0	.004*
Stewardship of private woodlands	53.0	47.8	53.0	.000*
<b>Health, Nutrition, and Food Safety</b>				
Safe food handling in restaurants/institutions	77.8	73.4	76.0	.129
Coping with chronic disease	73.1	70.3	71.1	.387
Healthy lifestyles (exercise, smoking, health)	73.6	69.2	68.5	.040*
Topics related to aging (housing, care, health)	71.2	63.2	64.5	.000*
Nutrition and diet	66.5	59.5	59.1	.000*
Safe food handling in the home	60.6	51.3	54.4	.000*
<b>Family and Home</b>				
Training for nursing home workers	75.8	69.0	71.3	.001*
Health insurance options (Medicare, long-term care, etc.)	72.7	63.7	70.9	.000*
Training for child care providers	70.9	64.6	64.2	.002*
Parenting programs (infant care, child development)	64.6	56.8	58.5	.002*

Program Area and Topic	Residence			sig
	Urban	Suburban	Rural	
	-----% Important-----			
Family financial management	60.0	50.7	54.7	.000*
Family communication	59.8	49.8	52.5	.000*
Proper home use of pesticides/fertilizers	52.5	45.8	51.9	.000*
Home gardening (soil testing, pest/disease control, etc.)	41.1	30.0	42.7	.000*
Community Affairs and Decision-Making				
Public finance/tax reform	64.9	61.9	65.9	.220
Training of local government officials	62.2	58.0	59.8	.345
Land use planning	53.1	57.9	57.8	.015*
Business management skills	53.5	46.4	51.7	.001*
Community economic development	53.7	47.2	48.3	.001*
Community leadership skills development	53.0	44.1	47.7	.000*
Understanding/managing community change	50.8	46.6	46.3	.045*
Volunteer skills development	45.9	38.3	42.0	.005*
Agriculture				
Crop production	61.6	60.0	67.4	.000*
Marketing farm products	58.8	55.2	66.7	.000*
Livestock production	58.8	55.7	64.9	.000*
Processing/distribution of agricultural products	60.2	53.0	64.0	.000*
Farm financial management	57.9	53.6	64.6	.000*
Commercial timber management	56.1	49.8	59.2	.000*

<sup>a</sup>Respondents rated each topic on a scale from “5” (very important) to “1” (not important). For this analysis, ratings of “4” and “5” are combined and called “Important;” ratings of “1” and “2” are combined to mean “Not important;” the mid-value (“3”) is retained as a separate category.