
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring the Journeys of Unit Leaders in School-Based Community Extension Initiatives in China

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| ABSTRACT

Community extension functions as a vital outreach component of educational institutions, connecting academic knowledge with societal needs. It aims to improve community quality of life and promote social development through the transfer of skills and resources. Extension unit leaders, typically faculty members, manage program planning and evaluation, facing challenges such as budget constraints and varying faculty support. Effective management requires a blend of intrinsic qualities like empathy and commitment, alongside professional skills such as cultural sensitivity and adaptability. Leaders employ strategies including time management and active stakeholder engagement to navigate institutional and community demands, highlighting the complexities of leadership in community extension. This study provides insights into the multifaceted nature of leading outreach initiatives and informs best practices for enhancing program effectiveness and sustainability.

| KEYWORDS

Lived experiences, community extension programs, and socio-economic poverty

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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Introduction

In today's knowledge-driven global economy, educational institutions are pivotal in driving social transformation and socio-economic development through community extension programs. These programs translate research and innovations into practical applications, empowering communities to enhance their quality of life and address developmental challenges. Success relies on creating educational environments that foster transformative learning and social responsibility. However, challenges such as inadequate personnel performance due to various socio-political factors hinder these initiatives. Extension leaders must possess diverse competencies, including 21st-century skills, effective leadership, and community engagement strategies. Their ability to manage resources and engage collaboratively is crucial in achieving program outcomes and fostering sustainable development.

Community Extension Programs in China

Community extension programs in China align with global principles while reflecting local sociocultural contexts. Schools conduct various activities to support community development, including educational initiatives, social services, public health campaigns, and technical training. These engagement efforts help students and faculty learn through real-world applications. Common programs include livelihood development, health promotion, and computer literacy training. Previous research has largely focused on program evaluation and impact, highlighting a gap in understanding the experiences of leaders executing these programs. Examining these experiences can offer valuable insights for enhancing leadership strategies, addressing challenges, and informing policy and professional development in higher education.

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Competencies of Community Leaders

Leadership competencies are vital for effective management of community extension programs. Leaders must inspire and coordinate individuals while addressing the complex social and cultural dynamics of their communities. Key traits include cultural sensitivity, adaptability, and strong interpersonal skills to build trust and collaborative networks. Successful leaders practice self-awareness and engage in continuous professional development to ensure equitable program implementation. Documented competencies encompass knowledge, communication, professionalism, ethics, and systems thinking, all necessary for designing and assessing programs that encourage community engagement. Moreover, extension leaders act as change agents, navigating conflicts and promoting innovation while mentoring new professionals. Organizational structures often include hierarchies from unit heads to directors, highlighting the importance of management competencies like planning and partnership-building to sustain relevant programs.

Attitude Towards Community Extension

The success of community extension programs is largely influenced by the attitudes of stakeholders, including extension teams, the community, and beneficiaries. Beneficiaries typically have positive attitudes, especially when they see clear benefits like enhanced skills and social engagement. Community extension personnel attitudes, influenced by demographics such as age and experience, vary; younger individuals are often more enthusiastic, while older ones provide reliability. Beyond demographics, organizational culture and clarity of purpose are crucial factors. Additionally, organizational commitment among extension personnel directly affects job performance and program outcomes, with committed staff being more innovative and engaged, aligned with the institution's social responsibility goals.

Problems Faced in Community Extension

Community extension programs encounter challenges such as policy changes, budget constraints, and time management issues. Government policies impact operations and program priorities, while budget limitations, particularly in smaller universities, restrict program planning and sustainability. Financial pressures may lead staff to utilize personal funds, affecting program continuity and participant satisfaction. Additionally, faculty must juggle teaching, research, and extension duties, with scheduling conflicts complicating program delivery and requiring effective coordination to maintain extension activities.

Research Objectives

This transcendental phenomenological study had the primary objective of comprehensively describing and understanding the lived experiences of Unit Heads responsible for managing community extension programs within School.

The specific objectives are guided by two central inquiries:

1. To identify the intricate lived experiences of the Unit Heads engaged in community extension programs within School in China.
2. To determine how do the participants navigate the multifaceted challenges associated with their roles as Unit Heads of community extension programs in School across the province.
2. To represent one of the core functions of community extension programs school.
- 3.
4. To design community extension programs to contributing to the reduction of socio-economic poverty within the communities served.
5. To designate and oversee community extension unit heads which are typically regular faculty members of respective institutions.

Methodology

Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative research design to explore the complex experiences of community extension unit heads in schools in China. This approach facilitated an in-depth understanding of the leaders' roles, challenges, and successes within

community extension programs. Data was gathered from the narratives and reflections of participants, which provided rich insights into the operational and interpersonal dynamics affecting program implementation, allowing for the identification of themes and deeper meanings in their professional experiences.

Respondents of the Study

Participants in the study were selected community extension unit heads from various schools in China, chosen for their substantial experience managing community extension programs. The selection aimed to balance diversity in their experiences while ensuring consistency in their leadership roles. Participants voluntarily engaged in the study, were informed about its objectives and procedures, and assured of confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms to protect their identities, which contributed to the authenticity of the data collected.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share experiences related to community extension programs. Interviews were audio-recorded for accuracy, with transcriptions made for analysis, alongside field notes capturing non-verbal cues and context. Ethical considerations were paramount; informed consent was obtained, and participants could withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms protected confidentiality, ensuring ethical principles were upheld to prioritize participants' well-being, privacy, and autonomy.

Treatment and Analysis of Data

For data analysis, transcendental phenomenology was employed, following Moustakas's modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method as adapted by Creswell and Poth. This approach aimed to deeply understand participants' lived experiences. The research involved identifying the phenomenon, practicing bracketing to eliminate preconceptions, and gathering narratives from twelve university faculty members engaged in community extension programs. Data analysis commenced with phenomenological reduction, condensing transcripts into significant statements organized into thematic categories. This led to developing textural descriptions of participants' experiences and structural descriptions detailing the contexts of these experiences. This integration articulated the essence of participants' lived experiences in community extension, aligning with the objectives of transcendental phenomenology.

Results and Discussions

Lived Experience of Community Extension Program Among Unit Leaders

Theme 1: Qualities of Extension Leaders. Within this theme, the participants offered diverse insights into the personal and professional attributes they believe extension leaders and educators should possess. These unique perspectives reflect the participants' individual personalities and areas of expertise. The responses were categorized to highlight the authenticity of their experiences.

Intrinsic Qualities. A prevailing sentiment among the participants underscores the significance of qualities like passion, dedication, commitment, and a genuine heart for community extension. The majority considers these intrinsic qualities as fundamental for the success of any community extension program. Without these qualities, the program's effectiveness might be compromised.

Intercultural Competencies. On the other hand, some participants prioritize intercultural competencies, considering them vital in managing change within diverse communities. They assert that while education, training, and intrinsic qualities are important, community orientation is a fundamental prerequisite for effective community extension management.

Dependability. Participants within this sub-theme highlight the value of dependability in a community extension leader. Being able to deliver is considered an advantage due to the multifaceted responsibilities and accountabilities of government offices.

Theme 2. Overloading. This theme delves into the participants' struggles in balancing their roles in school in China, where they are mandated to perform four interrelated functions: Instruction, Research, Extension, and Production. The requirement to mobilize communities

through extension activities can be time-consuming, and this affects the scheduled plans for their other functions.

Short Term Extension Program. Within this theme, the participants collectively shared their perceptions regarding the quality of the extension services they provide to their communities. School in China undergo evaluation and monitoring based on the number of participants they reach and the quality of extension activities they conduct. The participants' statements reveal that many of the activities are seen as short-term and primarily designed to meet government requirements.

Policies, Procedures and Process. Within this theme, participants identified policies, procedures, and processes as significant factors affecting the success of community extension programs. The rigidity of these processes often results in lengthy and exhausting approval procedures for extension activities. As a consequence, community extension leaders and their teams may lose motivation, leading to the discontinuation of programs.

The Evaluation Process. In this theme, participants emphasized the critical role of the evaluation process in community extension programs. Evaluation serves as a valuable tool to assess program effectiveness, measure goal achievement, analyze performance, and identify areas for improvement. It can also determine the impact of the program on target beneficiaries.

Theme 3. Faces of Community Extension. In this theme, participants highlighted the attitudes and behaviors of their fellow faculty members who are involved in community extension programs. The responses were categorized into three sub-themes, representing positive, negative, and ideal traits observed among their colleagues.

Supportive and Participative. In this sub-theme, participants described colleagues who exhibited supportive and participative attitudes towards community extension. These faculty members were highly cooperative and eager to engage in extension activities. Their willingness to contribute positively impacted the program.

Ideal Traits of Extension Members. This sub-theme describes the ideal characteristics and behaviors that participants believe community extension members should possess. These traits contribute to a positive and productive environment for community work.

Theme 4. Time Management. In this theme, community extension leaders shared how they effectively manage their demanding roles as community extension unit heads. Their experiences highlight the importance of prioritization, planning, efficiency, and commitment to fulfill their responsibilities.

Theme 5: Understanding the Needs of the Community. In this theme, community extension unit heads described their practices related to Community Needs Assessment (CNA) or Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). These methods serve as the initial steps in conceptualizing extension programs, as they involve direct interaction with the community to assess their needs, priorities, and available resources.

Theme 6: Positive Feedback . In this theme, community extension unit heads highlighted the role of positive feedback as a driving force behind their motivation and commitment to community extension. Hearing positive feedback from beneficiaries and recognizing the impact of their work proved to be a powerful intrinsic motivator.

Theme 7: Passing the Light to Others. In this theme, participants shared strategies they employed to influence their colleagues to become engaged in community extension. The objective was to motivate and encourage more faculty members to participate in extension activities, fostering a culture of community involvement within the institution.

Conclusions

Based on the study's findings, several conclusions can be drawn:

1. Effective community extension leaders must possess a range of qualities and skills essential for managing the demanding responsibilities associated with community extension programs. These attributes encompass intrinsic qualities, educational competencies, intercultural proficiency, and dependability. Additionally, adept problem-solving abilities and a supportive, participative attitude are imperative.

2. Community extension leaders are required to fulfill various roles, primarily serving as connectors, influencers, and motivators. In their role as connectors, they must demonstrate organizational skills and a deep understanding of the community.
3. As connectors and motivators, effective community extension heads excel in communication, serving as effective liaisons and sources of inspiration within the community.

Recommendations

The objective of this study was to gain insight into the experiences of Unit Heads responsible for community extension programs in Institutions within the Province of China. Delving into their experiences provides a more profound understanding of this phenomenon, drawing from both direct and indirect observations that may have implications for community extension education.

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Prioritizing Personal Attributes and Leadership Skills:** Given the demanding nature of community extension, it is highly advisable for institutions to place emphasis on the personal attributes and leadership skills when appointing individuals as community extension heads/leaders.
2. **Continuous Professional Development:** Institutions should proactively offer opportunities for continuous education, training, and workshops to community extension leaders. This will enable them to stay updated with evolving trends and remain relevant in their roles.
3. **Adjusting Workload:** Recognizing the unpredictability of community engagement, institutions should explore the feasibility of reducing the teaching load for extension unit heads. This adjustment would allow them sufficient time for document preparation and other community-related processes.
4. **Acknowledging the Importance of Community Extension:** For institutional leaders, community extension serves as the practical laboratory for all research activities. It is essential to allocate equal importance and allocate increased resources to support community extension initiatives.

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