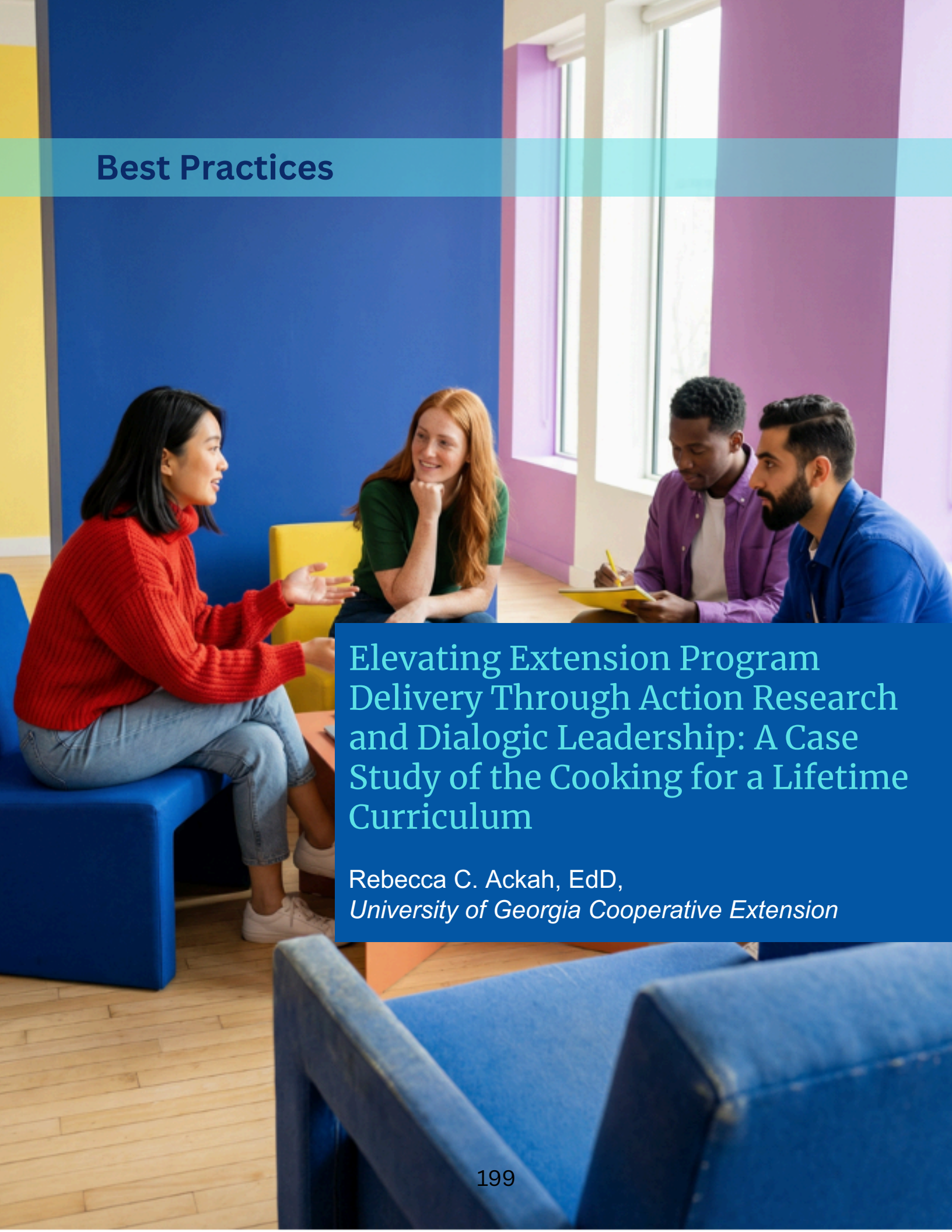


A photograph of four people in a modern, brightly lit room with colorful walls (blue, yellow, purple) and large windows. A woman in a red sweater is sitting on a blue bench, gesturing while talking to a woman with red hair in a green shirt. Two men, one in a purple shirt and one in a blue shirt, are sitting on the floor, looking at a yellow notepad held by the man in the purple shirt. The room has a wooden floor and blue armchairs in the foreground.

Best Practices

Elevating Extension Program Delivery Through Action Research and Dialogic Leadership: A Case Study of the Cooking for a Lifetime Curriculum

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Abstract

This article describes the application of action research and dialogic leadership to enhance delivery of the Cooking for a Lifetime cancer prevention curriculum in an urban Extension context. Through collaborative engagement with specialists and support units, the curriculum was reimagined from a traditional format to a hybrid model. Findings highlight how dialogic processes surfaced system-level barriers, clarified roles, and supported adaptive program design. Implications emphasize the importance of shared infrastructure, collaborative processes, and leadership approaches that support innovation in complex Extension environments.

Introduction

Extension programming has historically relied on standardized curricula designed for consistency and efficiency. However, as Extension systems increasingly engage with complex urban environments, these approaches may limit responsiveness and effectiveness (Dooley, 1997). Urban audiences require flexible, accessible, and contextually relevant programming, while Extension professionals face expanding expectations related to program delivery, marketing, and digital engagement (Hains et al., 2021). These shifts reveal a growing need to examine not only program design, but also the systems that support program implementation. This article explores how action research and dialogic leadership were used to reimagine the Cooking for a Lifetime cancer prevention curriculum, with attention to both program innovation and system-level learning. The purpose of this article is to describe how action research and dialogic leadership informed the redesign of the Cooking for a Lifetime curriculum and to identify key lessons for Extension professionals working in

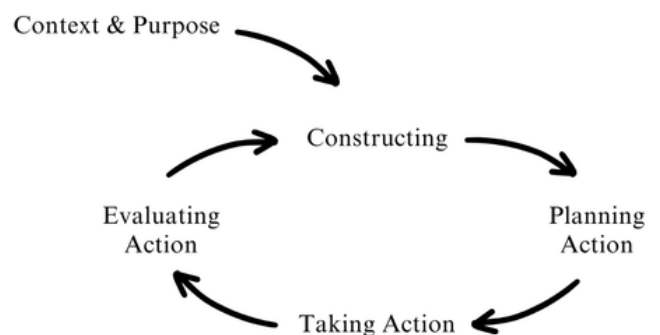
complex, urban contexts.

Background

Extension systems are increasingly operating within environments characterized by complexity, rapid change, and diverse stakeholder needs (Madhosingh-Hector & Bowers, 2024). Although traditional approaches to program development have historically emphasized consistency, efficiency, and replication, these approaches may be less effective in contexts where community needs are dynamic and unpredictable, particularly in urban settings (Ackah, 2025). Urban Extension professionals frequently work in communities with high population density, cultural diversity, and numerous organizations addressing similar issues, requiring programs that are flexible, responsive, and adaptable rather than uniformly standardized (Burton et al., 2022).

Within this context, action research and dialogic leadership offer complementary approaches for improving Extension programming. As seen in Figure 1, action research emphasizes iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection that allow practitioners to address real-world challenges while

Figure 1. Action Research Cycle



Note. From *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization* (p. 9), by D. Coghlan, 2019, SAGE Publications. Copyright 2019 by SAGE Publications. Reprinted with permission.

generating knowledge that informs practice (Coghlan, 2019; Auspos & Cabaj, 2014). Dialogic leadership complements this process by creating opportunities for shared meaning-making, encouraging participants to question assumptions, explore multiple perspectives, and collaboratively develop solutions that are responsive to complexity and uncertainty (Bushe & Marshak, 2016). Together, these approaches support collaborative learning and adaptive program development in evolving Extension environments.

As Extension programming continues to evolve, program effectiveness depends not only on curriculum quality but also on the organizational systems that support implementation. Access to instructional design expertise, marketing resources, digital tools, and coordinated organizational support can significantly influence the ability of Extension professionals to deliver effective programs (Ackah, 2025). This study applies action research and dialogic leadership to the redesign of the Cooking for a Lifetime curriculum, demonstrating how collaborative redesign can strengthen both program delivery and organizational learning within complex urban Extension systems.

Action Research Approach

The Cooking for a Lifetime cancer prevention curriculum was redesigned through an action research process that engaged Extension professionals in collaborative inquiry and iterative improvement. The goal was to enhance curriculum delivery while identifying organizational factors that influenced implementation within an urban Extension context. Action research provided a framework for examining emerging

challenges through ongoing planning, reflection, and adaptation (Coghlan, 2019). This process is shown in Table 1.

Developed in 2004, Cooking for a Lifetime is a Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) curriculum that promotes cancer prevention through nutrition education, food preparation, and healthy lifestyle practices. Although widely implemented across Georgia, its traditional delivery model presented opportunities to improve participant engagement, accessibility, and flexibility through hybrid delivery methods. The Action Research Team selected the curriculum because it offered an opportunity to redesign both program delivery and the organizational processes supporting implementation in diverse urban settings.

Collaborative Redesign Process

An interdisciplinary Action Research Team composed of county and state Extension professionals and one county manager was intentionally assembled to include individuals with organizational influence, relevant expertise, and a demonstrated commitment to the redesign process. The redesign occurred through iterative cycles of planning, action, reflection, and adaptation (Coghlan, 2019). Structured Action Research Team meetings combined facilitated dialogue, collaborative planning, and reflective discussion to identify organizational barriers, examine assumptions, and determine subsequent actions. As new needs emerged, additional organizational partners were incorporated into the redesign. For example, the Office of Marketing and Communications conducted audience research on the visual preferences of women ages 18–34 when discussing sensitive health topics, informing curriculum branding, messaging, and visual design.

Reflection and Learning

Meeting notes, planning documents, reflective discussions, and curriculum artifacts were reviewed following each action research cycle. Rather than conducting formal qualitative analysis, recurring observations and emerging patterns were synthesized through collaborative reflection to inform subsequent planning and redesign activities. The findings presented in this article represent organizational patterns that consistently emerged across the redesign process.

The author served as both practitioner and facilitator throughout the project, supporting curriculum redesign while documenting system-level insights generated through the dialogic process. This dual role enabled ongoing reflection on lessons that informed both program improvement and broader Extension practice.

Findings

The collaborative redesign revealed five interconnected themes related to organizational systems supporting Extension program delivery: (1) system-level constraints and resource access, (2) role ambiguity and distributed responsibility, (3) expanding expectations for Extension professionals, (4) collaborative redesign and innovation, and (5) the emergence of shared infrastructure (Table 2).

System-Level Constraints and Resource Access. Participants identified uncertainty regarding available organizational resources, including instructional design, marketing, and digital support. Limited awareness of available services often delayed decision-making and encouraged independent rather than collaborative work.

Role Ambiguity and Distributed Responsibility. Participants described unclear responsibilities across organizational units involved in curriculum development. Ambiguity surrounding instructional design, marketing, and digital content frequently resulted in duplicated effort or individuals assuming responsibilities outside their traditional roles.

Expanding Expectations for Extension Professionals. Participants recognized growing expectations for Extension professionals to develop expertise in areas such as graphic design, multimedia production, and digital content creation. While these skills were viewed as valuable, discussions highlighted concerns about organizational capacity and available support.

Collaborative Redesign and Innovation. Despite these challenges, iterative dialogue and collaborative planning resulted in a redesigned hybrid curriculum that combined self-directed learning with facilitated instruction. Participants attributed this innovation to the integration of multiple perspectives throughout the redesign process.

Emergence of Shared Infrastructure. Participants consistently identified the value of shared organizational infrastructure, including coordinated marketing, digital resources, and technical support. These collaborative supports emerged as practical strategies for improving efficiency while maintaining program quality.

Discussion

The collaborative redesign demonstrated that improving Extension programming requires attention not only to curriculum design but also to the organizational

systems in which programming occurs. Consistent with literature describing Extension as a complex adaptive system (Dooley, 1997; Ackah, 2025), participants encountered adaptive challenges that required questioning assumptions, redefining relationships, and collectively exploring new approaches rather than implementing predetermined solutions. Dialogic leadership supported this process by creating opportunities for participants to surface previously unspoken organizational challenges and develop shared understanding through collaborative reflection, reinforcing Bushe and Marshak's (2016) and Coghlan's (2019) descriptions of dialogue as a mechanism for organizational learning rather than simply decision making.

Participants consistently identified centralized templates, marketing resources, and shared digital supports as mechanisms for reducing duplication of effort while improving program delivery. These observations reinforce previous work suggesting that effective Extension programming depends not only on educator expertise but also on organizational systems that facilitate collaboration (Hains et al., 2021). Rather than expecting educators to independently create instructional and promotional resources, the redesign demonstrated how coordinated organizational infrastructure can strengthen both program consistency and organizational capacity (Figure 2).

Participants described increasing expectations for Extension professionals to develop expertise in digital engagement, multimedia production, and online content development while continuing to fulfill traditional educational responsibilities. Consistent with action research principles (Coghlan, 2019),

collaborative reflection shifted attention from individual skill deficits toward organizational capacity. These findings suggest that expanding professional expectations without corresponding investments in shared expertise and organizational support may reduce program effectiveness.

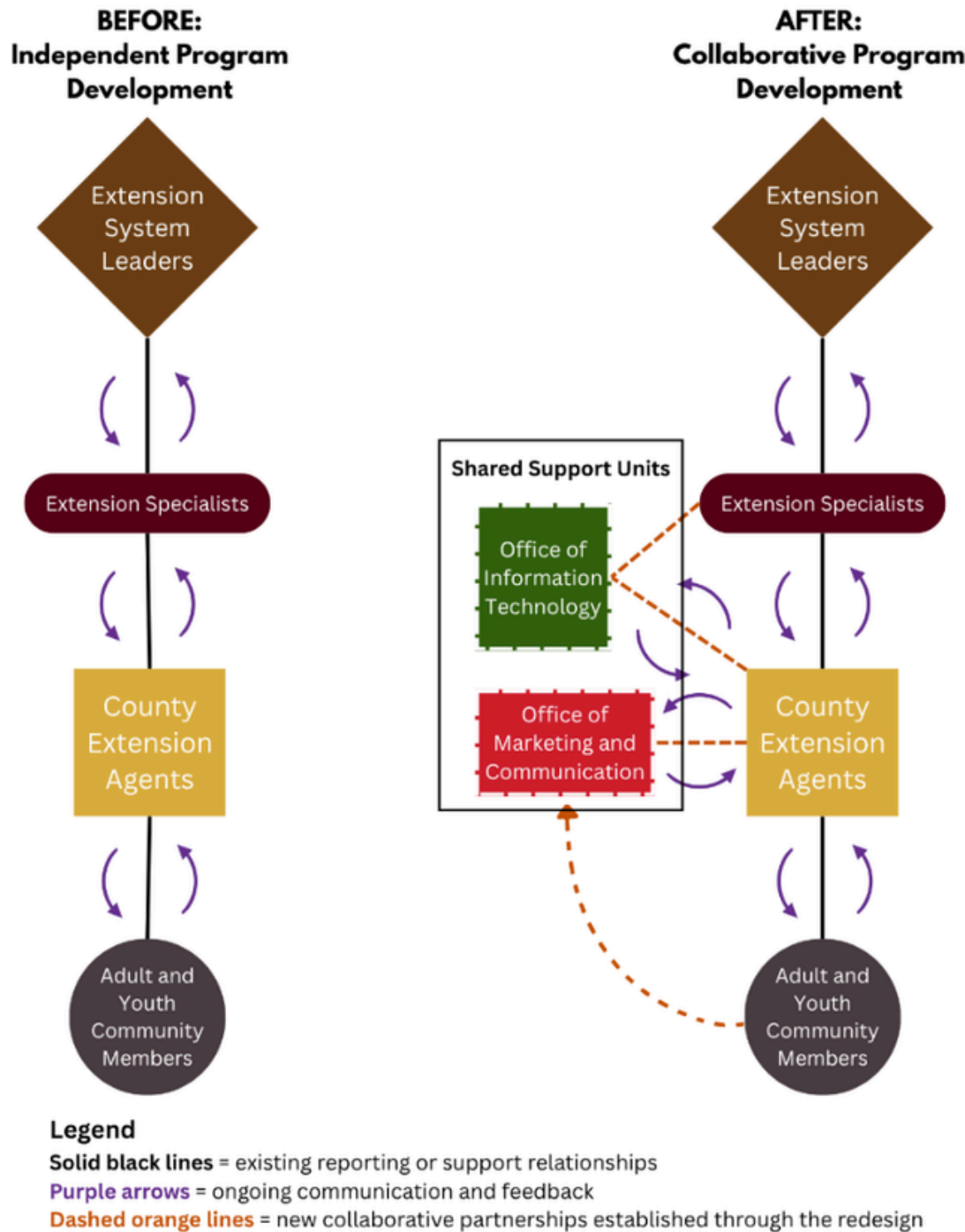
The redesign also highlighted the ongoing tension between standardized programming and local adaptability. Although standardized curricula promote consistency and quality, urban Extension professionals frequently require flexibility to respond to diverse audiences and rapidly changing community needs (Burton et al., 2022; Ackah, 2025). The hybrid curriculum developed through this project demonstrates that fidelity and adaptability can coexist when organizations intentionally design programs that preserve core educational objectives while allowing flexibility in implementation.

Collectively, these findings suggest that sustainable program innovation depends on aligning organizational expectations with available capacity. Rather than relying solely on individual initiative, Extension organizations can strengthen program delivery by investing in collaborative leadership, shared infrastructure, and adaptable systems that support educators working in increasingly complex environments.

Implications

Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS) professionals can strengthen program development by intentionally incorporating collaborative dialogue into their planning processes. Rather than designing programs independently, educators should create structured opportunities to engage colleagues, specialists, communications

Figure 2. Shared Organizational Support Model Emerging from the Curriculum Redesign



Note. Prior to the redesign, curriculum development and delivery relied primarily on traditional vertical Extension relationships. Through the action research process, collaborative partnerships with organizational support units, including Information Technology and Marketing and Communications, became integrated into program planning and implementation, creating a more coordinated system of support for Extension professionals.

staff, and community partners in conversations throughout program planning and implementation. These discussions help identify potential barriers early, align expectations across teams, and generate solutions that are more responsive to local needs. By embedding collaborative reflection into routine program planning, FACS professionals can improve both the quality and sustainability of Extension programming.

As Extension programming continues to evolve, FACS professionals should also advocate for organizational supports that match expanding program expectations. Rather than attempting to independently develop expertise in every aspect of program delivery, educators should leverage partnerships with specialists and support units while advocating for access to shared resources, professional development, and coordinated organizational systems. This collaborative approach allows professionals to focus their expertise on educational programming while improving efficiency and reducing duplication of effort across Extension systems. Figure 2 illustrates how the redesign expanded traditional Extension relationships.

Finally, FACS professionals should view reflective practice as an essential component of effective program leadership rather than an activity reserved for program evaluation. Intentionally reflecting on successes, challenges, and organizational dynamics, both individually and with colleagues, helps identify emerging needs, question existing assumptions, and adapt programming in response to changing community contexts. Making reflection a regular part of program planning and implementation supports continuous learning, strengthens organizational capacity, and promotes

more responsive and resilient Extension programming.

Limitations

This article describes the redesign of a single Family and Consumer Sciences curriculum within one state Extension system. As a result, the lessons presented reflect one organizational context and may not be directly transferable to all Extension environments. Rather than providing broadly generalizable findings, this article offers practical insights that may inform similar curriculum redesign efforts in other Extension settings. Organizational structures, available resources, and local contexts will influence how these approaches are applied.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to describe how action research and dialogic leadership informed the redesign of the Cooking for a Lifetime cancer prevention curriculum within an urban Extension context. Through collaborative engagement with specialists and support units, the curriculum evolved from a traditional delivery model to a more flexible hybrid approach. The redesign process demonstrated that successful program innovation extends beyond curriculum content to include organizational alignment, shared infrastructure, collaborative leadership, and the capacity to navigate complexity and adaptive challenges.

This experience also illustrated the complementary value of dialogic leadership and action research in Extension programming. Dialogic leadership fostered collective sensemaking and shared ownership of the redesign process, while action research provided a structured approach for

continuous learning, reflection, and improvement. Together, these approaches enabled participants to identify system-level barriers, develop practical solutions, and strengthen both program delivery and organizational learning.

As Extension systems continue to evolve, FACS professionals can apply these lessons by intentionally incorporating collaborative dialogue, reflective practice, and adaptable program design into their work. Future work should continue applying and evaluating dialogic leadership and action research across additional Family and Consumer Sciences programs and Extension contexts to better understand how these approaches can strengthen organizational learning and program innovation.

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Tables

Table 1. Action Research and Curriculum Redesign Process

Action Research Phase	Collaborative Activities	Organizational Learning
Planning	Reviewed the existing curriculum, identified delivery challenges, established redesign goals	Recognized opportunities to improve engagement, accessibility, and flexibility
Action	Conducted collaborative planning sessions; engaged Marketing and Communications and other support units	Expanded expertise beyond the project team and strengthened cross-functional collaboration
Reflection	Reviewed meeting notes, planning documents, and participant observations after each redesign cycle	Identified recurring organizational barriers related to roles, resources, and expectations
Adaptation	Revised curriculum content, delivery methods, branding, and support resources	Developed a hybrid curriculum model supported by coordinated organizational infrastructure

Note. Activities occurred through iterative cycles of planning, action, reflection, and adaptation; the phases are presented sequentially for clarity.

Table 2. Organizational Themes, Key Lessons, and Applications for Extension Practice

Theme	Organizational Learning	Practical Application
System-Level Constraints and Resource Access	Limited awareness of available organizational resources reduced collaboration and delayed implementation.	Improve visibility of instructional design, marketing, and technical support services.
Role Ambiguity and Distributed Responsibility	Unclear responsibilities resulted in duplicated effort and inconsistent ownership of program tasks.	Clarify organizational roles and strengthen cross-functional collaboration.
Expanding Expectations for Extension Professionals	Expectations for digital content creation exceeded available time and expertise.	Invest in shared expertise, professional development, and coordinated support.
Collaborative Redesign and Innovation	Iterative dialogue generated creative solutions that preserved curriculum fidelity while increasing flexibility.	Incorporate collaborative planning and reflection throughout program development.
Shared Organizational Infrastructure	Shared templates, marketing resources, and digital tools improved efficiency and reduced duplication.	Develop centralized resources that support educators across Extension programs.