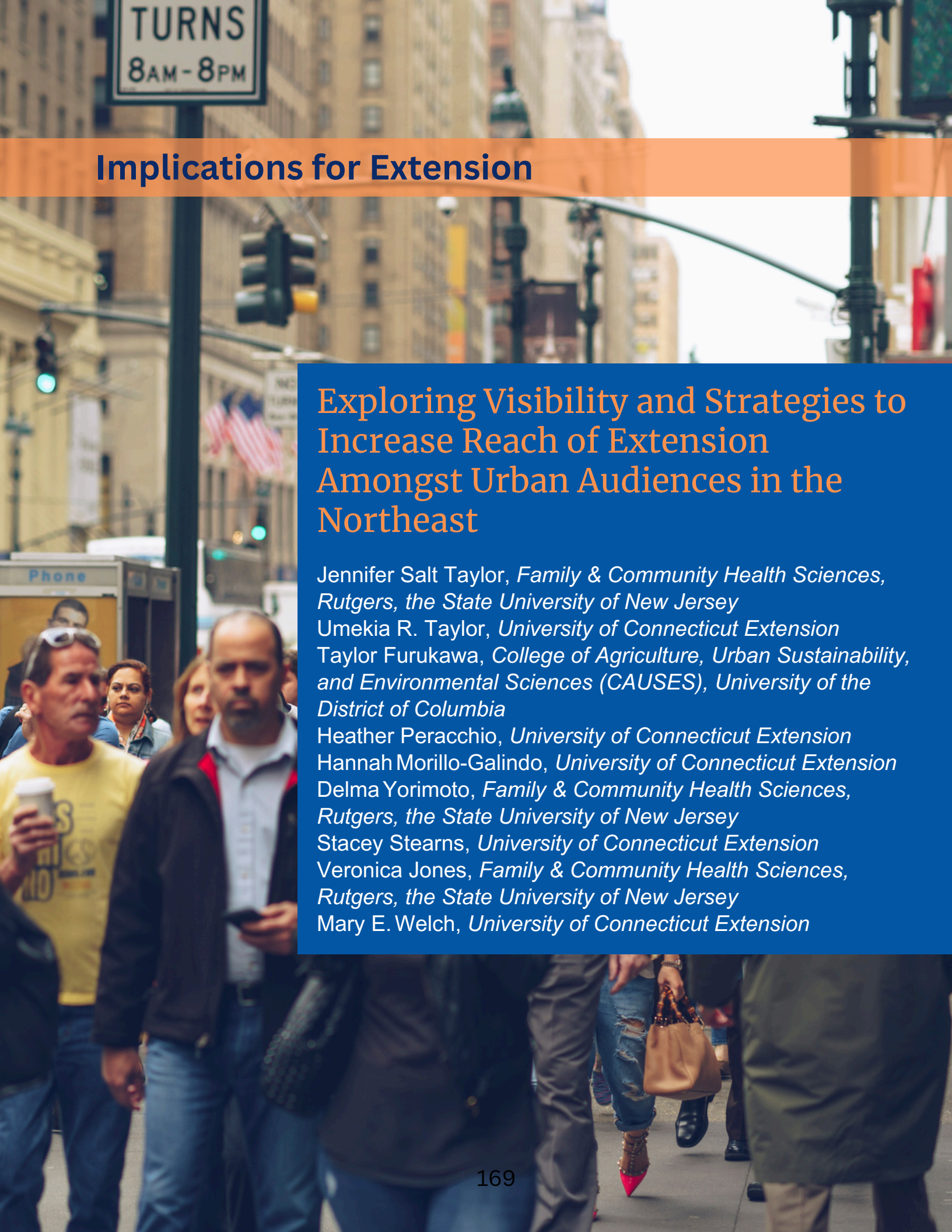




Implications for Extension

Exploring Visibility and Strategies to Increase Reach of Extension Amongst Urban Audiences in the Northeast

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Abstract

This multi-state project examined urban residents' awareness of Cooperative Extension and developed a unified Northeast Urban Extension branding strategy. Survey results from four land-grant universities revealed limited familiarity with the term "land-grant university," moderate recognition of Extension services, and strong individual university logo recognition. Respondents expressed interest in Extension but noted low prior participation. Findings underscore the need for coordinated marketing to strengthen relevance, visibility, and understanding among urban audiences. A regional logo and branding toolkit were created to support cohesive Northeast communication. This shared approach aims to elevate Extension's presence and connection with diverse urban communities.

Introduction

The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 created the Cooperative Extension System, broadening the relationship between the USDA and land-grant universities (LGUs) to encompass both research and agricultural education through the newly formed Extension service (National Institute of Food and Agriculture [NIFA], 2025). With 30% of the workforce engaged in farming and 50% of the population living in rural areas at the time, Extension's role and impact was crucial (NIFA, 2025).

Since then, Extension has impacted countless residents across the country, and expanded to program areas and geographic reach. While less than 2% of U.S. residents farm for a living and only 17% live in rural areas currently, Extension's role remains important, with an office in or near most counties in the

country (NIFA, 2025). Despite its impacts, Extension is still an undiscovered resource to many (Abrams et al., 2010; Probyn et al., 2005; Settle et al., 2019; Zagonel et al., 2023). This reflects the limited visibility, understanding, and recognition of the resources available to residents, particularly in urban areas (Zagonel et al., 2023).

Cooperative Extension's overall brand awareness is modest, with anywhere from 50 to 80% recognition, depending upon the audience and geographic location (Abrams et al., 2010; Probyn et al., 2005; Settle et al., 2019; Zagonel et al., 2023). Florida residents expressed their lack of recognition was related to the broad mission, various programs, and acronyms used (Zagonel et al., 2023). While many residents can recall Extension if they are prompted (Zagonel et al., 2023), research results have been consistent in that awareness was highest among rural residents and those involved with agriculture, prompting recommendations for clear messaging and strengthening the service and brand connection (Abrams et al., 2010; Probyn et al., 2005; Settle et al., 2019; Zagonel et al., 2023).

An Extension and outreach services study concluded that urban and suburban populations, especially those who are lower income, women, or have low education levels, may not be aware of Extension (Worley et al., 2023). The Northeast has a unique urban-rural juxtaposition of wealth and generational poverty which creates economic, educational, and policy challenges; to change the narrative, there must be communication, expansion, and new pathways forged to reach historically underserved and diverse populations (Mitchell et al., 2023). Moreover, urban audiences are more likely to participate in

Extension programs if they are aware of the programs, emphasizing the greater need for awareness (Worley et al., 2023). The National Urban Extension Leaders Northeast Initiative was formed to advocate and advance the strategic importance and long-term value of urban Extension activities.

As a result of their Extension and branding research, Abrams et al. (2010) and Zagonel et al. (2023) both encouraged stronger communication and marketing efforts. Broader recognition of Extension and its programs can lead to positive outcomes for general audiences, new community partnerships, and support from policymakers (Abrams et al., 2010; Probyn et al., 2005; Settle et al., 2019; Zagonel et al., 2023). Those aware of Extension generally have favorable views, and it is expected that increased awareness would also increase positive sentiment (Abrams et al., 2010; Probyn et al., 2005; Settle et al., 2019; Zagonel et al., 2023). While the existing positive views of Extension are a strong starting point, strengthening recognition and recollection of the brand, mission, and services will further improve Extension's ongoing role and relevance (Abrams et al., 2010; Zagonel et al., 2023).

As a brand, Extension is not at the forefront; instead, it leverages and relies upon its individual university brands (Abrams et al., 2010). While the individual university connection can be helpful, it omits the larger, nationwide Extension network that adds strength to each institution. Leveraging brands, regional focus, targeted marketing, stakeholder engagement, and clear integration of Extension and University branding are some recommended strategies (Abrams et al., 2010; Probyn et al., 2005; Settle et al., 2019; Zagonel et al., 2023). Extension

can improve marketing to urban and suburban audiences who may not be aware that Extension applies to more than agricultural programs. Targeting urban and suburban residents interested in the types of programs Extension offers could lead to strategic growth. However, if this expansion is to be successful, then there must be a focus on campaigns and advertising to non-agricultural populations (Worley et al., 2023).

Purpose

In 2024, a team of urban family and consumer sciences educators received a \$4,000 award from the Northeast Extension Directors to explore Extension's visibility among urban audiences and create an identifiable logo to present a unified voice of the Northeast's urban Extension initiatives. The Northeast project sought to add cohesion among urban Extension efforts through a visual identifier that can connect across individual states and programs. This is like national Extension programs such as 4-H, the Master Gardeners, and Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). These programs utilize visual identifiers to separate them from one-off programming and connect to a strategic, nationwide initiative to improve lives and communities. This manuscript explores the level of brand recognition among multiple Extension programs in urban communities and considers the implications of these findings for strengthening Extension's reach and impact.

Background

The Institutional Review Board at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, approved this project with partners from Pennsylvania State University (Penn State), the University of Connecticut

(UConn), and the University of the District of Columbia (UDC). During phase one, urban community members were surveyed about their awareness of Extension throughout August and September of 2024. Community members were recruited to participate in an online survey on Qualtrics, available in English and Spanish, to evaluate brand recognition of LGU logos in urban areas (see Appendix). Extension professionals distributed flyers, specific to each university with their logo and official brand colors, at urban community events and facilitated survey participation by providing tablets when available. Penn State was the only LGU to conduct surveys online via social media. The target audience for the survey included adults aged 18 and older who read English or Spanish and live or work in urban communities.

With a projected three-minute completion time, the survey consisted of four multiple-choice questions, with the option of additional multiple-choice questions and one open-ended question based on responses. Participants provided consent before beginning the survey, which was available in English and Spanish. The questions assessed familiarity with the term “land-grant university”, knowledge of the LGU in their state, and recognition of the local Extension services and logo. Each LGU identified ten program areas to gauge community recognition of the survey. Qualtrics security settings were

used to minimize multiple submissions from the same respondent and a password was required to take the survey. The password was provided on the flyers distributed at community events and made available on social media posts. Upon completion of the survey, respondents were directed to a separate survey where they could enter for a chance to win a \$25 electronic gift card. Once the survey was closed, the 25 available gift cards were allotted based on the number of survey entries: Penn State 10, UConn 7, Rutgers 6, and UDC 1. Gift card winners were determined by an online random generator of the respondents for each university.

Phase two of the project aimed to identify a logo for the branding kit. The study team recruited a graphic designer in January 2025 to design several sample logos. The team then shared comments with the graphic designer to refine the logos and chose the top three during the February 2025 research team meeting. The goal was for the logo to include urban and agricultural aspects of Extension and the Northeast. UConn and Rutgers’s teams organized in-person jar voting and the UDC team conducted in-person paper surveys; Penn State did not participate in phase two. For the in-person jar voting, the outside of plastic, lidded jars were taped with one of the three sample logos (see Figure 1) and each jar was lined with paper to discourage voters from being

Figure 1. Logo Voting Options



Logo A



Logo B



Logo C

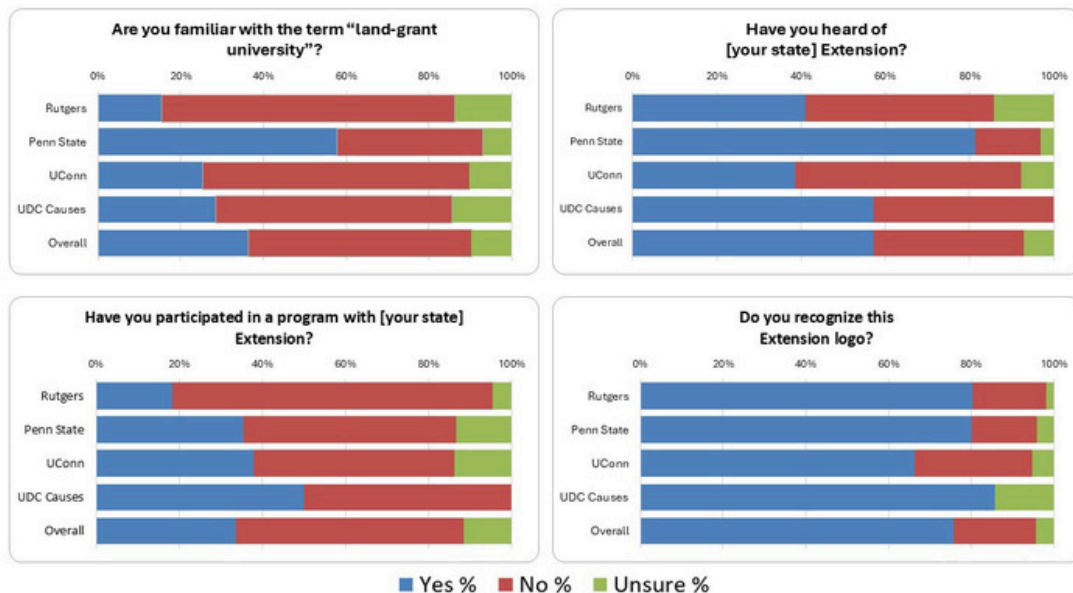
influenced by previous responses. Voters placed a token in the jar of their preferred choice. The tokens were counted and the data was collected by each university, then aggregated across the universities. In-person jar and paper surveys were conducted at urban community events and educational programs where both adults and children were permitted to vote. As children are a key target audience for many Extension programs, their inclusion in the logo voting process was intentional, allowing stakeholders to inform the final design selection. The research team tallied votes after each event and entered the results into a shared spreadsheet. Community votes were collected for a six-week period in the spring of 2025. In May of 2025, the graphic designer was provided with copy to create the logo guidelines. This included background information on Northeast Urban Extension, allowable use of the logo, font and color details, and study team contact information by university. The logo and guidelines were presented to the funders, the Northeast Extension Directors, at their August 2025 meeting.

Findings

For phase one, the participating universities received a total of 368 Qualtrics survey responses, with the following results from each LGU: Penn State, 222; UConn, 79; Rutgers, 60; and UDC, 7. To ensure the validity of the dataset, responses exhibiting characteristics consistent with automated bot activity were excluded from analysis. Indicators included a surge of submissions from locations across multiple countries within a brief timeframe after the survey was shared on social media. Therefore, 102 of Penn State's 222 total responses were retained for evaluation. Thus, 248 total responses were included in the analysis. Responses to questions were optional throughout the survey and the data reported here are based on total responses to each question. Figure 2 summarizes the results by university and total responses.

Approximately 54% (n=133) of respondents were unfamiliar with the term "land-grant university," though 57%

Figure 2. Survey Responses from Participating Northeast Land Grant Universities

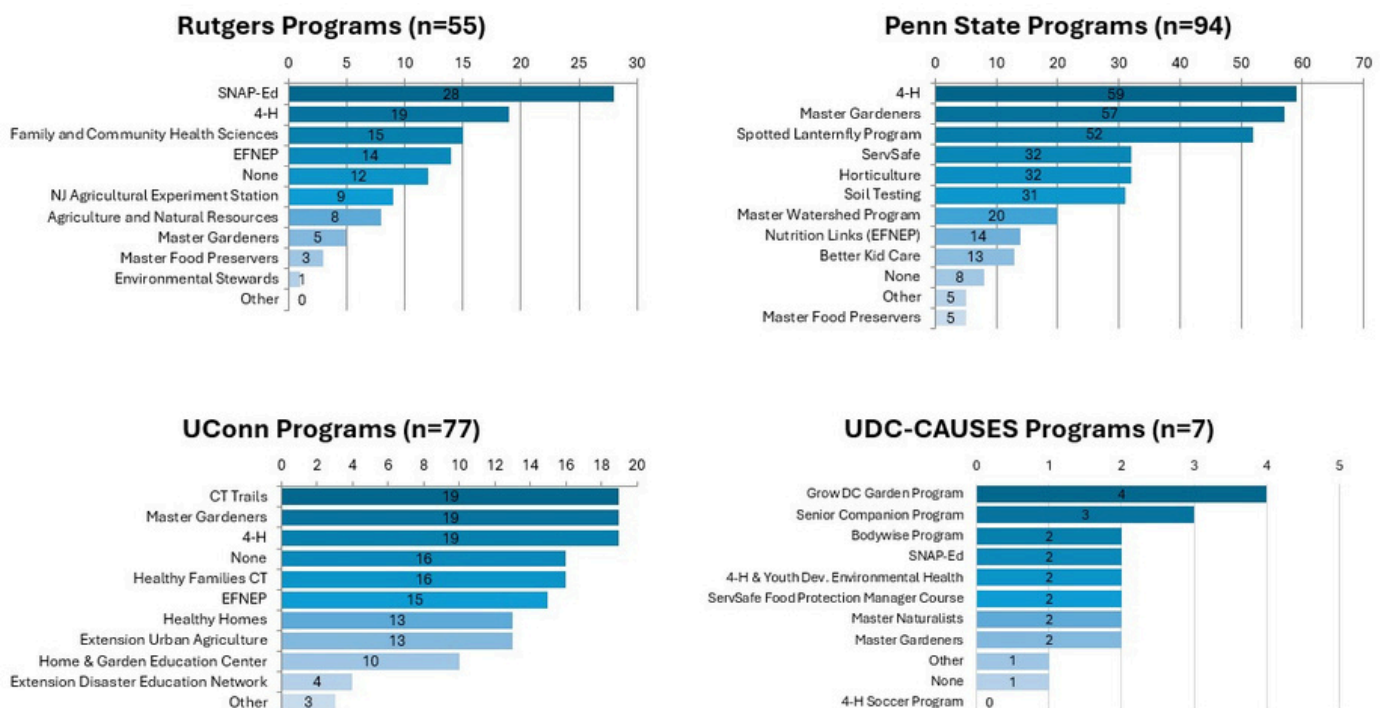


(n=136) of respondents were familiar with the names of each university's Extension services. Participants who heard of their LGU Extension services were asked if they had participated in any programs; of the 131 respondents, 55% (n=72) indicated they had never participated in a program with the named university. Overall, 76% (n=178) of respondents recognized the logo for the university's Extension services. Over half of the Penn State respondents (58%, n=59) indicated they were familiar with the term "land-grant university" and 81% (n=79) indicated that they had heard of Penn State Extension. Rutgers Cooperative Extension was recognized by 41% (n=23) of respondents, UConn Extension with 38% (n=30), and UDC CAUSES with 57% (n=4). While recognition appears to vary among LGUs, these results are intended to be descriptive rather than inferential, given the exploratory nature of the study and the wide variation in sample sizes across LGUs.

The four participating universities had some programs in common, namely the Master Gardener Program and 4-H. Rutgers Cooperative Extension, Penn State Extension, and UConn Extension each listed EFNEP as one of their programs. Additionally, Rutgers Cooperative Extension and UDC-CAUSES listed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed). It should be noted that each of the programs mentioned have or had a presence in all 50 states, which may have increased the respondents' familiarity with these programs, and that some, particularly 4-H, have national communications and marketing efforts. Figure 3 provides results of program recognition by university and program area.

For phase two, the participating universities received a total of 559 votes for the logo options, with the following

Figure 3. Program Awareness



totals from each LGU: Rutgers, 151; UConn, 199; and UDC, 209. The voting totals for each logo option were as follows: logo A, 200; logo B, 121; and logo C, 238.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study. Because the limited survey responses reflect input from select urban areas in four states, the findings should be interpreted as a sample rather than region-specific or nationally representative. Demographic characteristics were not collected from survey respondents, limiting the ability to explore differences in program recognition across populations. As some Extension programs may be more familiar to particular groups (e.g., 4-H to families with children), the inclusion of demographic data would have allowed for more targeted and informative analyses. Demographic questions were intentionally not included as they could be a deterrent for community members to participate in the survey. Since only a quarter of the Northeast LGUs actively participated in the project, there is limited input, as well as potential adoption, of the proposed logo. In phase one, Penn State administered the survey using social media as opposed to in-person. People may be more familiar with an organization that they already follow on social media; therefore, they may not be the intended audience. Finally, each LGU has its own communications and marketing policies, in addition to the preferences of Extension leadership at the universities, which may also hinder logo adoption.

Discussion

Implications from this multi-state project support the evidence that Cooperative Extension must adopt more intentional and coordinated marketing strategies to boost program participation, expand

Extension advocacy and support, and remain relevant for new generations, especially in urban communities. The project findings suggest there are opportunities to increase awareness and participation among urban audiences in Extension programming. While each institution must align their marketing with

their own programs and capacity, regional and national efforts can improve individual outcomes. Furthermore, the digital age makes geographic boundaries fluid. While some in-person programs are specific for state residents only, virtual resources expand beyond state or national boundaries. Regional or national Extension branding can further enhance overall recognition.

The Northeast logo initiative demonstrated one strategy for improving the visibility of Extension. Upon approval by the Northeast Extension Directors, the logo and full branding guidelines will be shared with all Northeast Extension programs. By using this logo and the accompanying materials, Extension professionals may help bridge the gap between rural roots and urban relevance, making Extension more accessible and visible to all. Previous research (Abrams et al., 2010; Probyn et al., 2005; Settle et al., 2019; Worley et al., 2023; Zagonel et al., 2023) shows the need for targeted marketing because of Extension's broad mission, strong individual program branding, and an abundance of acronyms. Therefore, use of new logos and branding, needs to be carefully considered by the individual institution so that it complements and enhances their existing efforts, rather than creating further confusion or diluting the existing brand. Secondary brand associations can make a positive impact through their links to other entities (Keller, 2020), especially if the secondary

association is value-based (Khan, 2021). The findings from this exploratory study suggest several promising strategies for strengthening Extension branding. Extension professionals may consider leveraging the credibility and visibility of established university brands while clearly communicating the connection between Extension and the parent institution. Additionally, adopting regionally focused and targeted marketing approaches may improve outreach effectiveness among specific audiences. Finally, actively engaging stakeholders in branding efforts may help build stronger brand awareness, trust, and long-term support for Extension programming.

Conclusion

A multi-state or regional shared brand and voice could allow Extension to promote its programming in urban areas and improve opportunities for access to Extension resources. This concept of utilizing shared branding could be expanded to other regions or disciplines within Extension. A unified approach to elevating the visibility, recognition, understanding, and consumer demand for Extension amongst Northeast urban audiences may combat the lack of awareness about Extension. The Northeast Urban logo and toolkit may help to bridge the gap between Extension and urban audiences. The future direction of this project should focus on the marketing and promotion of this toolkit to the Northeast LGUs for adoption and dissemination. All residents, rural, suburban, and urban, support Extension services, so it is imperative that the programming reaches all these audiences and remains relevant in providing research-based information. The Northeast brand logo can be used by urban programs to connect them to Extension and help residents better

Extension and help residents better understand Extension's purpose to improve their lives and communities. If used intentionally and extensively, regional branding has the potential to reposition Northeast Extension from the old adage of operating behind the scenes to a well-recognized resource.

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Appendix B

Brand Survey Instrument

This appendix contains the flow of the Qualtrics survey participants completed in phase 1 of the project. Participants were only asked Question 2 if they responded “yes” to Question 1. Additionally, participants were only asked Question 4 if they responded “yes” to Question 3. Each LGU selected ten “programs” to feature for Question 5. Each LGU’s Extension logo was featured in Question 6.

1. Are you familiar with the term “land-grant university”?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Unsure
2. Who is your land-grant university?
3. Have you heard of [University Cooperative Extension]?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Unsure
4. Have you participated in a [University Cooperative Extension] program?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Unsure
5. Have you heard of the following program? Please select all that you are aware of.
 - a. Rutgers
 - i. SNAP-Ed
 - ii. 4-H
 - iii. Family and Community Health Sciences

- iv. EFNEP
 - v. New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station
 - vi. Agriculture and Natural Resources
 - vii. Master Gardeners
 - viii. Master Food Preservers
 - ix. Environmental Stewards
 - x. None
 - xi. Other
- b. Penn State
- i. 4-H
 - ii. Master Gardeners
 - iii. Spotted Lanternfly Program
 - iv. ServSafe
 - v. Horticulture
 - vi. Soil Testing
 - vii. Master Watershed Program
 - viii. Nutrition Links (EFNEP)
 - ix. Better Kid Care
 - x. Master Food Preservers
 - xi. None
 - xii. Other
- c. UConn
- i. Connecticut Trails
 - ii. Master Gardeners

- iii. 4-H
- iv. Healthy Families CT
- v. EFNEP
- vi. Healthy Homes
- vii. Extension Urban Agriculture
- viii. Home & Garden Education Center
- ix. Extension Disaster Education Network
- x. None
- xi. Other

d. UDC

- i. Grow DC Garden Program
- ii. Senior Companion Program
- iii. Bodywise Program
- iv. SNAP-Ed
- v. 4-H & Youth Dev. Environmental Health
- vi. ServSafe Food Protection Manager Course
- vii. Master Naturalists
- viii. Master Gardeners
- ix. 4-H Soccer Program
- x. None
- xi. Other

6. Do you recognize this logo? [Picture of University Extension's Logo]

- a. Yes
- b. No

c. Unsure

7. Would you like to be entered into a drawing for a \$25.00 Amazon gift card?

a. Yes

b. No