

PIONEERS IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: MUN Extension, 1959-1991

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THE TWENTY-SIXTH IN A SERIES OF ARTICLES DEVELOPED FROM REGULAR PUBLIC FORUMS SPONSORED BY THE LESLIE HARRIS CENTRE OF REGIONAL POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT. MEMORIAL PRESENTS FEATURES SPEAKERS FROM MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY WHO ADDRESS ISSUES OF PUBLIC CONCERN IN THE PROVINCE.



Since its inception, Memorial University has engaged with the people of the province in many ways, one of the most notable of which was the University's Extension Service. Over several decades Memorial was world-renowned as a model of how universities could use interactive media and field workers to promote community development. While other universities had divisions responsible for educational outreach, few matched the multifaceted role Memorial's Extension Service took on during 1960s, 70s and 80s.

From its beginnings, Memorial assumed a role and responsibility beyond its campus and beyond educating young people. Both government and the university sought to transform the new province from "backwardness" to modernity. This agreement supported a rapidly expanding Extension Service with a broad mandate. Extension, in turn, influenced government educational, social, and development policies, and directly led to the growth of non-governmental organizations in the province.

The roots of Extension predate Confederation. During the 1930s the Commission Government had used both Adult Education and field workers to encourage community development. Government field workers who had been trained at St Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, NS, and at the University of Wisconsin, had organized study groups in rural Newfoundland in an effort to encourage co-operatives. In the midst of the

social and economic deprivation of the Depression, the government had high hopes for education and producer co-ops to provide communities with the tools to make themselves viable.

It's not surprising that Memorial picked up the torch of local development. Premier Joseph R Smallwood had once said that he would rather have a small university with a large extension service than a large university with a small extension service. In 1959 Memorial established an Extension Service and appointed S J Colman (MA Oxford) as director, and Edna Baird (BA Dalhousie and BHSc McGill) as a staff member. Colman was influenced by the example of the educational outreach programs of the Land Grant Colleges in the United States, and extension services in other parts of the world, including the educational outreach of Oxford University and the agricultural work of the University of Wisconsin. He recognized, however, that a successful service would have to be both tailored to local conditions and experimental. "There must be no hesitation in trying new projects, or in abandoning activities which have manifestly failed," he wrote. "That there will be failures and setbacks is evident to anyone familiar with the problems of organizing extension activities anywhere, quite apart from the special difficulties which arise in Newfoundland."¹

The key to success, Colman felt, was having development specialists living in rural communities and thus in a position to encourage local volunteers

to assume leadership positions. “To know intimately local people and their needs; to be accepted as a respected member of the local community rather than a suspected outsider . . . [can] provide a psychological foundation for extension workers which cannot be achieved if the university keeps itself and its faculty apart, in one place.”² Colman also advocated a range of adult education courses, taught by specialists in home economics, labour relations, and business management, as well as academic subjects. Other instructors would nurture the talent in the arts, such as music, painting, and drama. He envisioned a set of working committees at Memorial, on fisheries, agriculture, social welfare, etc., which would identify the needs of the community.

One of the particular features of Memorial’s Service was that it employed field workers who lived in rural communities and were thus responsive to local needs. Some of the earliest field staff, like D J MacEachern and Julia Morgan, were Antigonish- or Wisconsin-trained, while Fred Earle, for example, drew upon his life experience in business in rural Newfoundland. Rather than having outreach workers bringing programs devised at the University to the people, Memorial’s field workers attempted to aid people in articulating their needs and achieving their own goals. In fact, many of Extension’s successes were the product of listening to people rather than trying to implement a preconceived set of objectives generated by a centralized bureaucracy. Many of the province’s non-governmental organizations active today, such as cooperative enterprises, the fisheries union, rural development associations, professional associations, and many others, had their origin in public education and workshops conducted by Extension.

With the appointment of Donald Snowden as director in 1964, MUN Extension continued to emphasize programs based upon the needs that communities identified themselves, and adopted an unstructured approach to their work that encouraged experimentation. While Snowden was by temperament no bureaucrat, he knew his way around Ottawa. His ability to access federal funding programs allowed Extension to move into policy areas in a flexible and efficient way. Extension recruited a creative and dedicated group who shared a sense of mission common in the 1960s. In keeping with the temper of the times, its field workers and its media unit acted as social activists and community organizers.

Memorial’s Extension Service allowed its workers great autonomy and rewarded experimentation. If someone within Extension had an idea for a film, a program, or a course, he or she had the freedom to pursue it. If someone in a community asked for information on a particular problem, a film could be created or a conference organized to address that issue. That is not to say that everyone always agreed – staff meetings to discuss their work could result in people being critical of each other’s pet projects. When the media unit produced a film, for example, everyone in the unit would get together to screen it and discuss both the aesthetics and content of the work. The ongoing critical appraisal would prompt improvement even as people were encouraged to take chances.

A practical difference between government departments and Extension was that the University made effective use of media to promote its activities. While federal and provincial governments struggled to make clear to people what their policy objectives were, Extension had its own very professional television, magazine and film unit. They had available the most modern communications and media technologies, and used them in inventive ways. The media unit was able to make short films, and later videos, almost on demand.

They used media not only used to publicize their programs and educate the public, but also as an interactive means of community engagement. In the 1960s few rural Newfoundlanders had experience attending conferences, serving on local boards, or expressing opinions on open line radio programs. Extension pioneered the processes of getting people to articulate their views. MUN Extension went well beyond providing information; it encouraged local activism. The innovative uses of film, including the “Fogo Process,” became a renowned aspect of Extension’s work and continues to be used in community development in many parts of the world. Such programs not only met people’s need for information, but also became an impetus for community empowerment.

In the “Fogo Process” the work of making the film itself encouraged local people to articulate their

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concerns, and the finished film was of lesser importance. In this, Extension owed much to the philosophy of social change articulated by American community organizers and the Canadian Challenge for Change Program of the National Film Board, but they also invented their own methods of provocation. Films were shown to people within the community, sparking further debate, and sometimes that debate itself was filmed for the benefit of the community and other communities facing similar problems. Extension sometimes also showed the films to government officials, bringing rural people's concerns to politicians and bureaucrats.

By the 1980s the province had changed. Fiscal pressures encouraged university administrators to turn to core academic programming, and to cut the field staff and media unit which had once been at the heart of Memorial's engagement with rural Newfoundland and Labrador. Improvements in communication and education in rural parts of the province also made it seem less crucial that Extension help people articulate their needs. Community groups, which Extension had in many cases founded and then left to develop their own path, were now more than able to lobby for themselves. The larger and more professional civil service of the 1980s no longer left economic and social policies to the university, and the mood in North America had shifted away from optimism that government programs could eradicate social problems. Many of those who ran the Extension Service, from its earliest days forward, had imagined its role as enabling people to begin to organize themselves and once community groups or government stepped up, Extension would withdraw. It was to create the conditions in which it was no longer needed.

By the late 1980s many people felt that Extension no longer had a significant role to play in the province, but there were critics of the University's backing away from the kinds of programming that become synonymous with Memorial's unique approach to rural development. In the 1990s distance education of a more traditional sort continued, and Memorial's faculty engaged in research into the province's challenges and worked with government. But there was no longer a unit specifically devoted to soliciting the views of communities about their needs, and aiding them in solving their problems. For some people in the province, particularly many in the arts community who owed a great debt to Memorial, the University's decision to close Extension Service in 1991 seemed to signify that Memorial was abandoning its original mission to transform the province. Extension



had helped to create modern Newfoundland, a society in which it was no longer needed. It remains a model of how a university can serve its community from which we can still learn lessons. **NQ**

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1 S J Colman "Memorial University of Newfoundland Extension Service" 3 May 1960. Copy sent to Joseph Smallwood by Colman, 9 May 1960, 3.09.035, Smallwood Papers. ASC, QEII Library, MUN.

2 *Ibid.*