

GRADUATE COLLEGE

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Doctor of Education

Educational Leadership & Policy Studies

March 21, 2008

12:00 – 2:00 p.m.

427A Waterman Building

Title: Cultivating extension Communities of Practice

ABSTRACT

This study empirically describes and analyzes the characteristics and functionality of the “Communities of Practice (CoPs)” used within eXtension, a new virtual initiative of the Cooperative Extension (CE) system. It also endeavors to lay the foundation for empirical analysis of CoP processes, which to date have been explained almost exclusively using qualitative case study methods.

Land-grant universities were founded on the ideals that higher education should be accessible to all and that the university should teach liberal and practical subjects and should share the college's knowledge with people throughout their states. eXtension is an educational partnership of more than 70 land-grant universities. Its reported purpose is to help Americans improve their lives with access to timely, objective, research-based information and educational opportunities accessed through <http://www.extension.org> . This Web resource is customized with links to state land-grant university CE Web sites.

This mixed-method action research project applied to the virtual environment describes the extent to which people who became part of an eXtension Communities of Practice (XCoPs) reported that they engaged in purposeful cycles of continuous inquiry in dialog, decision-making, action-taking, and evaluation and the attainment of eXtension's goals. An Internet survey obtained descriptive data of members' participation within the eight pioneer XCoPs to assess the extent to which each XCoP engaged in the cycle of inquiry outlined earlier. Analysis of the survey data resulted in the categorization of low-, medium-, and high-level functioning XCoPs. Members of three pioneer XCoPs representing each category (low, medium, high collaboration) participated in online interviews that revealed how CE's reward structure, XCoP membership composition, and leader/member skill sets impact XCoP performance in meeting eXtension goals. Two sets of “best practices” for eXtension initiative staff and XCoPs emerge from the discussion of triangulated data.