

NC STATE

EXTENSION



2030 Strategic Plan



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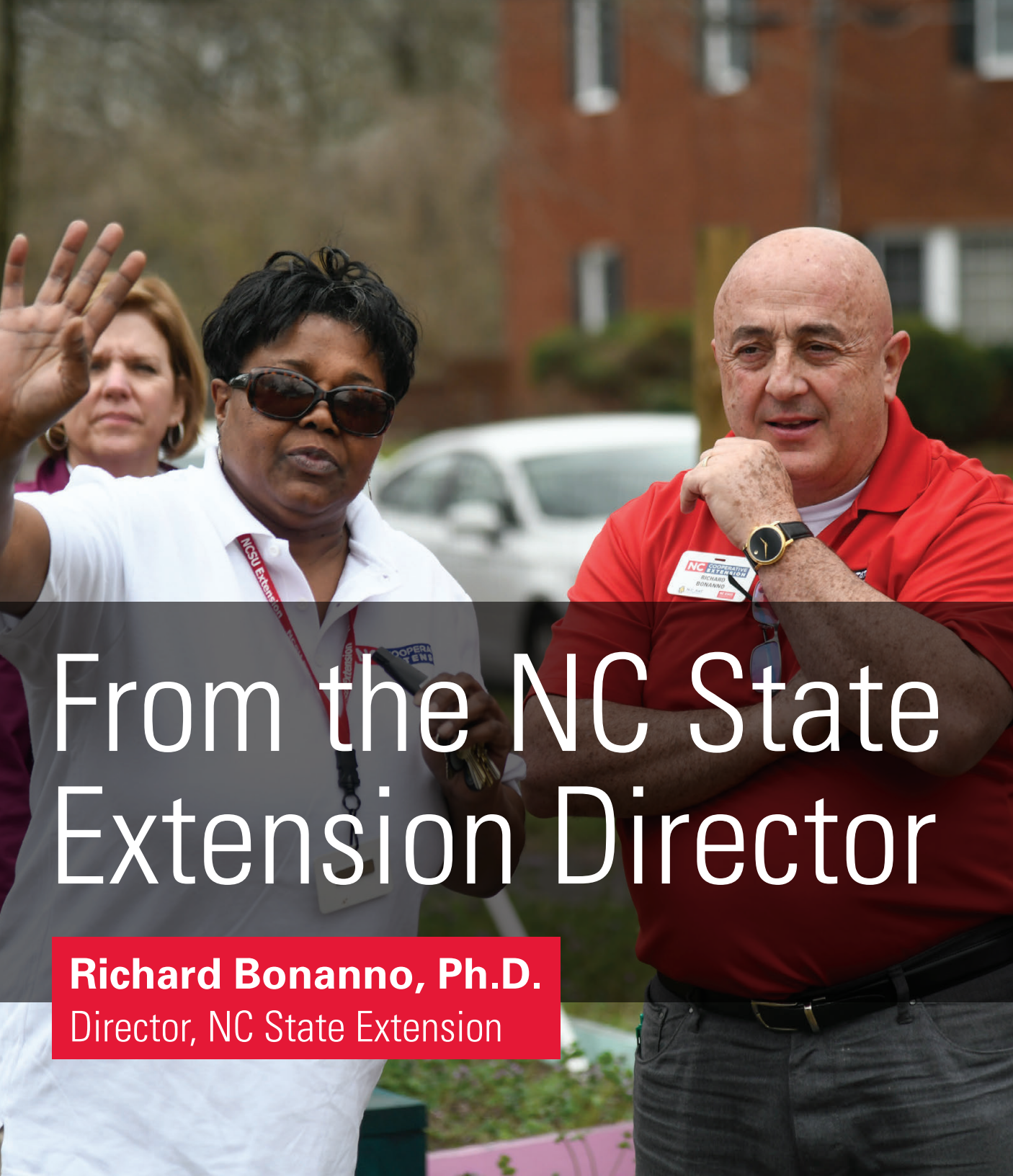
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From the NC State Extension Director

Richard Bonanno, Ph.D.
Director, NC State Extension

Each day, I am in awe of the scale and vital importance of what we do in Extension and the impact we have on the people of North Carolina.

As Extension professionals at NC State University, we're part of something bigger. Partnerships are the lifeblood of a land-grant university, as we work hand-in-hand with other institutions to realize our mission. Moving ahead, this NC State Extension strategic plan will help chart an ongoing course for individual initiatives within our university, as well as lead the way forward for continued collaboration, success, and growth within the N.C. Cooperative Extension partnership

This is only possible through the dedication of our entire Extension team, both on campus and in counties statewide. There is no better example of this commitment in action than what we saw first-hand during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. As communities around our state struggled with uncertainty and challenging times, Extension did exactly what it has done for decades—continued delivering solutions that improve our residents' lives and grow our state. I am always proud of the inspiring work performed by our team, but especially during these difficult times. We adjusted our delivery methods to meet the changing needs of our stakeholders. We remained relevant despite the circumstances of the world around us. We brought on new resources to support our statewide Extension operations. Also, we continue to become a more diverse organization at all levels.



I also recognize that while much of the world around us has changed in recent years, Extension's essential role in North Carolina and for the millions of residents we serve has never been clearer. In developing this strategic plan, we traveled the state and heard from over 1,000 of our team members, met one-on-one with various stakeholders, and distributed a survey that received over 9,000 responses. From this process, the following observations emerged.

- › One of the most valuable aspects of Extension is our presence in and partnerships with every county of the state and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. Residents recognize our N.C. Cooperative Extension partnership's local roots and presence in their communities, often referring to the team members they work with regularly as "my agent." We must preserve this presence at all costs and continue to demonstrate a symbiotic, mutually beneficial relationship between Extension and the communities of our state.
- › Our tremendous coverage across the state is both a benefit and a challenge. We need to communicate and engage more effectively with all of our employees throughout the state—whether at county centers, outlying stations, or on our main campus in Raleigh.
- › The university resources we bring to the local level are a key benefit, providing the growers and communities of North Carolina with direct access to some of the world's preeminent researchers who are solving challenges of both today and tomorrow. We need to continue highlighting these research-backed connection points for those we serve and make it easier and more seamless for our team to interact with and support one another across the state.
- › We must continue prioritizing our people—through training, career pathways, more efficient operations, improved work-life balance, better communications, knowledge sharing and other resources that enable our team members to have long and vibrant careers serving the state through our organization while helping to build a sustainable and diverse workforce.
- › We must constantly monitor and take note of the trends we observe in our state and the world and adapt our programs and services accordingly to remain relevant to our communities. This may involve developing new programs or adding onto existing programs to emphasize topics that impact our stakeholders, like internet connectivity, climate change, sustainable agriculture, and the need for soft skills development in our youth. In others, it may mean finding ways to either serve or direct stakeholders to community partners that are better equipped to help, such as residents struggling with mental health needs where Extension may be the only door they know to enter.

- › To be as impactful as possible, our strategic plan at NC State Extension must connect with our partners at N.C. A&T State University. This partnership is a defining part of Extension in North Carolina, and it is vital that our respective strategic plans align and reinforce one another—particularly regarding how we develop and deliver programs that serve the same constituencies.
- › We must emphasize and promote the work of Extension through clear and robust communications. For far too many years, Extension has been referred to as our state's "best-kept secret." We also know that once a resident engages with Extension and receives value from one of our programs or services, they often maintain that connection. We need to work aggressively to ensure all residents throughout North Carolina have the knowledge to unlock the value of Extension in their communities in ways millions of their neighbors have already experienced.

During one of the listening sessions that helped shape this strategic plan, one of our stakeholders referred to Extension as "the crown jewel of North Carolina." I could not agree more. The work we do to improve communities, serve stakeholders, and grow our state's most important industries extends well beyond monetary value or impact. Our individual and collective efforts, striving toward shared goals, is the reason why NC State Extension is the envy of so many other states. It is the reason why we must continue to build upon our past successes, maintain our current momentum, and evolve to expand our relevance while meeting the many varied needs of our communities.

These are the challenges we face and the commitments we make to our entire Extension team and residents across the state of North Carolina. It is my honor to lead the charge, alongside your partnership and support, to fulfill these commitments and to continue serving the lives, land, and economy of North Carolinians.



Richard Bonanno, Ph.D.

***Director of NC State Extension
Associate Dean, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences,
Vice Provost for Outreach and Engagement,
North Carolina State University***



Background

The responsibilities of our statewide network—NC State Extension—are deeply embedded into the fabric of NC State University.

Housed in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, our Extension organization is both vast and varied. At the campus level, this includes a workforce comprising faculty, administrators, administrative staff, technicians, graduate students, and more. Within the counties we serve, our Extension team features agents, administrators, support specialists, program assistants, technicians, and more. Each staff member is an important part of the impact we have daily on the state of North Carolina. Our partners throughout the state are equally crucial to our work—from the counties that are integral to Cooperative Extension and North Carolina's many commodity groups and growers to institutions like N.C. A&T and other educational, community-based organizations that deliver programs and services complementary to those of Extension.

N.C. Cooperative Extension is one of the most unique and far-reaching collaboratives in the U.S., extending the presence, expertise, and

groundbreaking work of two of our state's leading institutions—North Carolina State University and North Carolina A&T State University—into the fabric of every North Carolina county and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. In close coordination with our county partners and many others, Extension serves millions of North Carolina residents by delivering programs, services, and guidance that generate \$2.1 billion in annual economic impact for our state.

The past several years have challenged our statewide Extension operations in unprecedented ways—from undergoing a significant reorganization in response to state economic influences and budget cuts to navigating the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic as an organization that prioritizes personal connections and service-based relationships. Extension has continued to overcome these challenges, delivering the resources so many residents rely upon daily, and serving a key role in how both universities fulfill their respective land-grant missions.

This strategic plan is designed to account for the many varied needs of all those we work with who make Extension possible and those who we support every day. In fact, it is the product and direct reflection of a comprehensive, stakeholder-driven planning process over many months. This process featured dozens of one-on-one conversations with Extension stakeholders, listening sessions across the state at Extension District meetings to gather feedback from employees, and a survey that received over 9,000 responses from program participants and stakeholders throughout the state.

The end result is a strategic plan that sets the vision for what Extension seeks to both maintain and become in 2030; identifies the priorities, goals, and strategies that will guide NC State Extension in the coming years; and outlines how this work will continue to support the translation of research into real solutions that impact and transform the lives and economic impact of North Carolinians.

MISSION

NC State Extension extends research-based knowledge to all North Carolinians, helping them transform science into everyday solutions that improve their lives and grow our state.

VISION

We are the trusted go-to resource in North Carolina for connecting research and education to the communities, economies, and families of our state, creating prosperity for all North Carolinians.

EXTENSION IN ACTION

\$2.1B

in annual economic impact to the state of North Carolina

1,000+

employees throughout the state

101

local Extension centers

8,000+

educational programs delivered annually

17,000+

educational activities delivered annually

3.8M+

visitors to 200+ Extension websites each year

27-to-1

return on government investments annually



STRATEGIC PRIORITY 1

Expand Extension Awareness and Utilization Throughout the State

N.C. Cooperative Extension is a strategic partnership that touches and supports millions of North Carolinians each year.

Despite our tremendous reach and the role NC State Extension serves through this partnership, we also know there are millions more who have never heard of Extension nor participated in any of our programs. While many may view this as an inherent challenge, particularly for an organization with fixed resources, we instead view it as a significant opportunity to further our impact on the state and fulfill our mission.

We will systematically review and adapt our programs to meet the changing needs of our state, and we will work to more aggressively promote Extension throughout North Carolina. We will also equip our local staff with the resources and guidance to promote Extension programs and services in their own communities, but as part of a consistent and coherent brand that we are echoing and reinforcing statewide.

We know that in order to reach new customers, we need to develop programs and materials that effectively connect with the diverse residents of our state. These include expanding programs that support our youth, building partnerships with other organizations that can further our impact, adapting our resources and how we promote them to multicultural populations, and introducing global perspectives into Extension that have a positive impact on all throughout our state.

By continuing to build an inclusive environment for all North Carolinians, we will not only see growth in the numbers of residents we serve, but reassurance and confidence among our funders and partners that Extension is continuing to fulfill its mission and generate a return commensurate with the investment placed in us. We will also work with our partners to leverage this growth and identify new or additional sources of funding that can expand our reach and programming, while helping to stabilize and sustain the Extension network for years to come. Ultimately, our success becomes that of our state—where every dollar provided to Extension generates a multiplier impact in return. We are committed to not only maintaining that return in future years, but growing it and our state as well.

GOAL 1.1: ESTABLISH A MORE COHESIVE AND WIDELY KNOWN BRAND IDENTITY FOR EXTENSION

KEY INITIATIVES

KEY INITIATIVE 1: Develop a statewide marketing plan to maximize awareness of and participation in Extension programs

KEY INITIATIVE 2: Dedicate additional targeted marketing resources and support to promote Extension programs

KEY INITIATIVE 3: Develop more comprehensive and uniform program-specific marketing toolkits for campus, county, district, and regional Extension employees

GOAL 1.2: ADAPT PROGRAMS AND SERVICES TO IMPACT BOTH TRADITIONAL AND NEW AUDIENCES THAT REFLECT THE DIVERSITY OF OUR POPULATION

KEY INITIATIVES

KEY INITIATIVE 1: Expand Extension programs for middle and high school students and expand partnerships with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and local education agencies throughout the state

KEY INITIATIVE 2: Develop a targeted marketing and communication strategy to engage North Carolina high school students in the work of Extension, while highlighting career opportunities in agriculture and life sciences

KEY INITIATIVE 3: Expand collaborative Extension programming efforts with N.C. A&T State University to continue responding to the full continuum of large and small farmer stakeholders





KEY INITIATIVE 4: Evaluate and modify program entry points, formats, times, and registration requirements to provide greater accessibility to historically underrepresented groups and residents of all demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds

KEY INITIATIVE 5: Adapt Extension materials, communications, and resources to best serve the multicultural populations and varied demographics of North Carolina

KEY INITIATIVE 6: Implement Extension-focused international programs and projects that connect campus-based Extension faculty with global partnership opportunities and engage county agents in related global learning

SUCCESS METRICS

- Extension brand awareness among key audiences
- Number of marketing resources used
- Marketing reach and engagement rates
- Balanced participation of program participants proportionate to the county or statewide population
- Balanced participation of program participants proportionate to the county farm operator population
- Number of new or adapted programs based on evolving trends and needs
- Number of new international projects and programs involving Extension faculty and agents
- Number of existing programs that have been reshaped or enhanced to be culturally appropriate and accessible
- Increase in middle school aged youth program participation
- Increase in high school aged youth program participation



STRATEGIC PRIORITY 2

Provide High-Caliber, Impactful Programming That Meets the Needs of Local Communities

The state of North Carolina is undergoing significant changes that range from population growth and shifting population patterns to climate change impacts and growing health disparities, combined with the aftereffects of natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Agricultural needs are changing—through shifting weather patterns, generational changes on farms throughout the state, labor scarcity, growth in technology, and the demand for data-driven farm management and unique solutions that are needed in both urban and rural environments, among others. Family and community needs are also evolving, with growing health inequities and disparities, mental health challenges, and food insecurities.

NC State Extension is poised to help North Carolinians navigate these changes just as we have for decades, with delivery methods that continue to evolve to ensure that Extension stays current and relevant. We also recognize that as dynamics and needs evolve in our state, we must adapt while constantly contemplating the question, “What might negatively impact our state in the future, and what can we do today to mitigate that impact?” This starts with auditing and continually



evaluating the programs we have historically provided to ensure they are still meeting community needs and expectations, generating a return on the investment for our state and counties. As we understand these changing needs, we are then able to align our programming accordingly, while setting clear expectations for our entire Extension team to push themselves to innovate and adapt. We also need to leverage technology wherever possible to streamline our programs and services, but in a way that is usable and approachable to all those we serve.

The reality is everything we do in Extension is community development, where we support stronger, more prosperous communities throughout our state. We have an opportunity to unite those communities around shared challenges and topics that apply in all geographies albeit in different ways—from broadband and digital literacy to land-use planning and the impacts of extreme weather events. Extension

employees are well positioned as natural conveners and facilitators to inform dialogue and solutions that our partners can adapt and implement in their respective areas.

NC State Extension continues to be focused on leaning into the changing demographics and diversity of our state, equally valuing our rural and urban communities, but recognizing they may have unique needs that require our team to meet them where they are. We are strong believers that Extension should be viewed as a safe space for anyone to be exposed to a new thought or way of thinking—without judgment of current practices or perceptions. It is through this mindset that we will serve those who have relied on or partnered with Extension for years and attract new stakeholders who can similarly see Extension as a valuable asset to their communities.

GOAL 2.1: EVALUATE, ENHANCE, AND INVEST IN HIGH-IMPACT EXTENSION PROGRAMMING

KEY INITIATIVES

KEY INITIATIVE 1: Audit current program success metrics, design process criteria for evaluating programs, and sunset underperforming ones

KEY INITIATIVE 2: Support the development of district- and county-level needs assessments that help continually identify, develop, and adapt programming to meet community-specific needs

KEY INITIATIVE 3: Develop a formula for quantifying Extension impact among communities and populations served

GOAL 2.2: EXPAND EXTENSION PROGRAMMING BASED ON ONGOING AND EMERGING COMMUNITY NEEDS

KEY INITIATIVE 1: Establish statewide teams and advisory resources focused on future trends (e.g., climate change, health and food disparities, community connectivity, and youth development)

KEY INITIATIVE 2: Expand Extension programs and employee training to incorporate recent trends and community needs impacting local growing conditions, connectivity and data management needs, and connections to external resources that support family and youth stability

KEY INITIATIVE 3: Build and expand partnerships with other university programs and initiatives (e.g., the Data Science Academy and the N.C. Plant Sciences Initiative) that connect data-related training and support for the agricultural industry

KEY INITIATIVE 4: Coordinate with CALS on the digitization of research stations and the surrounding footprint, transforming them into hubs for data-related research and utilization by local and regional agricultural producers

KEY INITIATIVE 5: Establish and strengthen connections between growers and communities across the state with the cutting-edge research conducted by NC State



KEY INITIATIVE 6: Repurpose existing community development programming and frame future programs and initiatives by training staff to leverage resources with a focus on systematic changes across local communities

SUCCESS METRICS

- Standardized needs assessment instruments
- Standardized evaluation measures
- Extension impact factor
- Number of new programs implemented
- Impact of new programs implemented



STRATEGIC PRIORITY 3

Position NC State Extension as a Premier Employer in North Carolina

Any organization's impact is only possible through the combined efforts of its people. This sentiment is particularly true for NC State Extension, where our people are at the heart of all we do and the programs we deliver throughout the state.

An Extension employee's daily life is not easy. Our employees often wear multiple hats and juggle numerous responsibilities, stretching themselves across a county or multiple counties, maintaining subject matter expertise on a variety of topics, and navigating challenging environments ranging from delivering in-person services amid a global pandemic to helping residents in moments of crisis or uncertainty. For most, the drive that keeps our team engaged in Extension is our land-grant mission. We recognize that we need to continually elevate and reward that commitment and passion, providing ways for our people to not only build their careers at Extension, but come to work at Extension in the first place. In the counties we serve, our stakeholders count on us to be experts in our fields, as well as highly effective communicators—both of which come with time, training, tenure, and stability. This reinforces the need to not only attract great talent to Extension, but to also cultivate and keep it, while helping to facilitate knowledge sharing and transfer from longtime employees to those newer to our Extension team.

We need to make it as easy as possible for our employees to do their work and serve our stakeholders. This means providing regular and relevant training, investing in our future leaders, improving business processes, and continually aligning the work of our specialists with our county-based employees delivering programs based on their research. It also involves building a culture across Extension and all our offices that values and supports our employees, replenishing our volunteer bases following the pandemic and modifying systems to recruit program participants more effectively.

We are committed to taking the necessary steps in areas we can control that will help position NC State Extension as a go-to employer for years to come, while continuing to advocate for other policies or initiatives that may be outside of our direct control but matter just as much to our team and the communities we collectively serve.

GOAL 3.1: IMPROVE EXTENSION EMPLOYEE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

KEY INITIATIVES

- KEY INITIATIVE 1:** Identify alternative avenues for recruitment, including expanding internship programs through alternative funding sources
- KEY INITIATIVE 2:** Develop a comprehensive process for assessing existing employee onboarding, training, and mentoring programs and regularly adapting programs to changing needs
- KEY INITIATIVE 3:** Reevaluate total compensation for positions to ensure compensation is appropriate for each role, comparable across geographic locales, and competitive with equivalent public sector employees
- KEY INITIATIVE 4:** Expand reward and recognition systems to foster greater employee connectivity and engagement
- KEY INITIATIVE 5:** Create and communicate career ladders providing employees with opportunities for progression and retaining institutional knowledge
- KEY INITIATIVE 6:** Collaborate with CALS departments and other colleges as necessary to reward, recognize, and elevate nontraditional impacts and contributions related to Extension appointments
- KEY INITIATIVE 7:** Develop policies that support employee work-life balance and work flexibility
- KEY INITIATIVE 8:** Establish greater connectivity and communication channels among Extension leadership and employees at all levels of the organization

GOAL 3.2: INVEST IN EMPLOYEE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

KEY INITIATIVES

- KEY INITIATIVE 1:** Standardize and communicate expectations for providing all employees with consistent onboarding and training
- KEY INITIATIVE 2:** Establish a comprehensive organizational professional development plan, with curated, role-specific professional development workshops embedded in district, regional, and statewide meetings
- KEY INITIATIVE 3:** Develop succession plans for key Extension leadership, including leadership development programs to cultivate current employees for future leadership opportunities
- KEY INITIATIVE 4:** Establish a comprehensive professional development and leadership program for employees hired into supervisory roles
- KEY INITIATIVE 5:** Implement a regular and required 360-degree assessment program for all CEDs, DEDs, and Extension senior leadership
- KEY INITIATIVE 6:** Establish regular meeting cadence for employees in related programs and within regions to share knowledge, best practices, and ways to better engage or support their communities and stakeholders



GOAL 3.3: EVOLVE THE EXTENSION ORGANIZATION FOR THE FUTURE

KEY INITIATIVES

KEY INITIATIVE 1: Assess needs and develop plan to hire dedicated staff in key roles supporting functions related to Extension communications, central business office coordination, and programmatic outcome measurement and tracking

KEY INITIATIVE 2: Using natural attrition, shift existing resources and staff to align with real-time and future staffing needs

KEY INITIATIVE 3: Reevaluate roles every 3-5 years and reallocate positions and resources based on evolving community needs

SUCCESS METRICS

- Annual employee retention
- Compensation comparable to equivalent public sector positions
- First-year employee retention
- Enhanced data collection for Extension employee offboarding
- Assess successful onboarding and mentoring of new employees through 18-month, post-hire 360 surveys
- Employee engagement and satisfaction survey results





STRATEGIC PRIORITY 4

Enhance the Impact and Benefit of Extension Communications

One of the most unique and valuable parts of Extension is our presence in all counties of the state and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

While a widespread presence is a tremendous differentiator for our state, it also represents one of our greatest challenges—particularly for our Extension team.

This is particularly true in areas furthest from NC State's Main Campus in Raleigh, where communications that impact all Extension employees may not reach everyone as intended, policy changes or new systems may not be fully articulated, or messages may not fully consider the nuances and uniqueness of the counties in which our team works. Extension is also responsible for generating an abundance of research and fact-based information for our external stakeholders, program- and policy-related information, or other information involving our Extension team. This information is not always easy to access or find, creating challenges for our stakeholders to quickly get what they need to do their jobs or engage with Extension as productively and efficiently as possible. In the coming years, we will work to implement more robust and redesigned platforms, systems and structures that help reduce these barriers, and highlight the information, data and resources that are most relevant and crucial to those we serve and support.

We also reaffirm our commitment to regular, high-quality communications between Extension and all those we serve around the state. This includes how we translate groundbreaking research taking place at NC State and within disciplines or initiatives specific to our stakeholders (e.g., the N.C. Plant Sciences Initiative), as well as how we provide great customer service to our counties and communities while proactively working to help solve our stakeholders' greatest challenges. It also involves how we hold meetings and convene stakeholders in ways that maximize their time and our impact, recognizing that traditional methods used may no longer be effective or preferred by those who still need and rely upon our work.

As one of our commodity group stakeholders noted in a listening session for this strategic plan, "The best communication platform ever intended is Cooperative Extension." It is incumbent upon us to leverage this platform accordingly in ways that resonate with our stakeholders, support our team's work, drive engagement and participation in our programs, and reaffirm the value and importance of Extension to our state for years to come.

GOAL 4.1: MORE EFFECTIVELY INFORM AND ENGAGE INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS IN THE WORK OF EXTENSION

Key Initiatives

KEY INITIATIVE 1: Redesign knowledge-sharing platforms to streamline access to Extension information and resources

KEY INITIATIVE 2: Design standard internal communication practices to streamline information sharing, provide targeted and relevant updates using multiple channels and media, and enhance the impact of Extension communications

KEY INITIATIVE 3: Implement systems for piloting, communicating, and building robust feedback loops related to large-scale programmatic, policy, or technology changes

GOAL 4.2: IMPROVE COMMUNICATION WITH EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS THROUGHOUT NORTH CAROLINA

KEY INITIATIVES

KEY INITIATIVE 1: Provide employees with basic customer service training and expectations for public professionalism and engagement

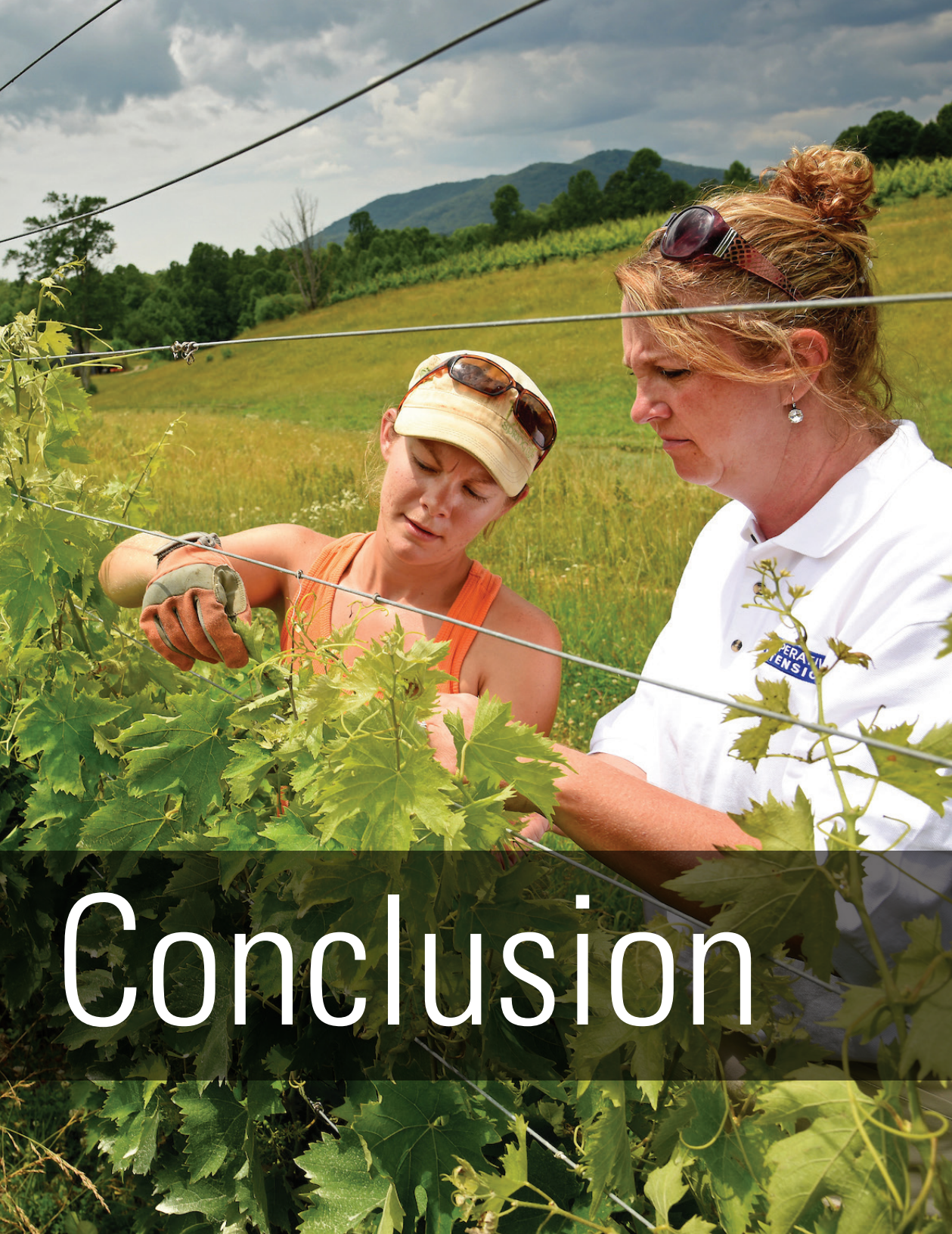
KEY INITIATIVE 2: Combine and streamline web-based resources for Extension to standardize access points and information for external audiences, including comprehensive calendars of local, district, regional, and statewide events

KEY INITIATIVE 3: Highlight successful programs and external partnerships to demonstrate how Extension supports sustainability and innovation within North Carolina communities

SUCCESS METRICS

- Internal platform analytics
- Internal communication satisfaction survey
- Communication open and engagement rates
- External stakeholder satisfaction survey results
- Website access and use analytics
- Annual Extension funding





Conclusion

North Carolina is beginning to enter a period of normalcy that has eluded society since the onset of the global pandemic in early 2020.

We are also experiencing significant population growth and resettlement throughout our state. We see many opportunities and challenges as we move forward. These include the impact of climate change, more resilient agriculture, health impacts of food and nutrition education, and continuing to help elevate our youth to become our future leaders. While we see significant economic growth in some of our urban centers, many of our rural counties are navigating uncertainty, with residents feeling at risk of being left behind.

These are all very real trends—some positive, some negative, but all representing opportunities for Extension to have an impact on our state and inform our future trajectory. As our state continues to grow and evolve, we are prepared to evolve, refocus, and transform alongside it. To do so, we must anticipate trends and be responsive to changing dynamics, whether through programming, resource allocations, policy changes or other shifts. We must also evolve how we build and maintain a vibrant and sustainable workforce, with our Extension professionals at the heart of all we do.

Extension today is in a very different place than it was years ago. We have tremendous momentum behind us. We have incredible achievements to point to as clear reasons why NC State Extension and the N.C. Cooperative Extension network are national leaders and the envy of so many other states. We have strong partners in our counties, our state's commodity groups and growers, other institutions, private industry, and more. In addition, we have a dedicated, passionate team that cares deeply about the people of our state and the work they do to create a more prosperous North Carolina.

As we think about the future of NC State Extension and Extension overall, there is much to look forward to. NC State Extension is prepared to leverage these assets, overcome challenges facing our constituents and our organization, build upon this foundation in new and exciting ways, and take North Carolina and its population to even greater heights.



NC STATE EXTENSION

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Campus Box 7602 NC State University Raleigh NC 27695-7602

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