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Is There an Extension Discount? What Two New Studies Say About the Economists Who Take the University to the People

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Overview

Cooperative Extension has been shrinking for a long time, and most of the shrinkage has fallen on people. The national Extension system lost 22% of its full-time equivalents between 1980 and 2010 (Sun Ling Wang, Choices, 2014), and because salaries and benefits absorb the bulk of the budget—Texas A&M AgriLife Extension spent an average of 90% of its federal and state appropriations on personnel between 2018 and 2021—every real-dollar cut eventually becomes a position that is not refilled. Between 2011 and 2019, total federal research funds to land-grant universities grew 32.8%, from $699 million to $928 million; total federal Extension funds grew 5.6%, from $479 million to $506 million. Put simply, the research side of the land-grant mission has been gaining on the Extension side for decades.

Two studies I coauthored over the past year ask what this means for the economists who hold Extension appointments. The first, with Siun Lee and Rudy Nayga at Texas A&M, Jeff Hyde at Penn State, and Yangxuan Liu at the University of Georgia, appeared in the Journal of Extension and uses public salary records (https://doi.org/10.66752/1077-5315.5601). The second, led by Trey Malone at Purdue with Craig Carpenter at Michigan State, Courtney Bir at Oklahoma State, Andrew Van Leuven at Vermont, and Rebecca Wasserman-Olin at Colorado State, was published open access in Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy on September 3 and draws on a 2025 survey of 125 agricultural economists (https://doi.org/10.1002/aepp.70126). Read together, they tell us three things: Extension economists are paid less than their departmental peers, and the gap widens with rank; the profession rates Extension appointments as clearly less prestigious than research or teaching, and graduate students have noticed; and the fixes are mostly administrative rather than expensive.

1. An Extension Discount of $5,000 to $15,000 a Year

We collected FY2021 base salaries for 444 professorial-rank faculty in 19 agricultural economics departments at 1862 land-grant universities, 93 of whom held at least a partial Extension appointment. The sample covers all four USDA regions, and the overall mean base salary was $135,090. Because departmental means range widely, from roughly $102,000 at South Dakota State to $232,000 at UC Berkeley, we compared each person to their own department.

The result is straightforward. Faculty with Extension appointments earn $10,464 below their department mean; faculty without earn $2,772 above it, for a gap of $13,236 ($p = 0.0002$). Comparing within the same rank in the same department, which is the fairer test, the gap narrows to $9,219 but remains highly significant. We call this the “Extension discount.”

Table 1. Mean FY2021 base salary by rank, Extension vs. non-Extension faculty in 19 agricultural economics departments

Rank	Extension faculty	Non-Extension faculty	Extension discount	p-value
Assistant professor	$94,642	$99,707	$5,065	0.066
Associate professor	$118,302	$123,922	$5,620	0.145
Full professor	$150,088	$164,620	$14,532	0.001
Raise, assistant to associate	+25.0%	+24.3%		
Raise, associate to full	+26.9%	+32.8%		

Source: Lee, Hyde, Liu, Nayga, and Zhang (2025), Tables 3 and 4. Base salaries only; p-values test the within-rank, within-department salary differential between Extension and non-Extension faculty. n = 444 faculty, 93 with Extension appointments.

The discount exists at every rank but is much larger at the top (Table 1). The gap is $5,065 for assistant professors, $5,620 for associate professors (not statistically significant), and $14,532 for full professors. The raise from assistant to associate is essentially identical for both groups, 25.0% versus 24.3%. The raise from associate to full is not: 26.9% for Extension faculty versus 32.8% for everyone else.

Our data are a single cross-section, so we cannot say why. Two explanations are plausible and not mutually exclusive. One is that the gap grows over a career: Extension faculty receive smaller raises, and their outside options are weaker because an Extension economist's value rests on local networks that do not travel to a competing offer in another state. The more optimistic reading is that departments have been closing the starting-salary gap, so today's full-professor gap is a relic of an era of even larger starting differentials. Actually, I suspect both are true, and I would weight the first more heavily, since the assistant-level gap is still $5,065. One caveat applies to every number here: we observe base salary only, so we cannot net out 9- versus 12-month appointments, supplemental pay, or the share of each appointment that is actually Extension.

One could argue this is simply a different market, the way Major League Baseball paid relief pitchers $2.0 million on average in 2023 while starters earned $6.8 million. That is a legitimate position for a dean to take, but it should be taken deliberately, not by default.

2. Valued in Mission, Penalized in Practice

The salary gap is one symptom. The survey asks how the profession itself sees Extension. In spring 2025 we surveyed members of the AAEA Extension Section and Graduate Student Section and received 125 responses: 51 graduate students and postdocs, 50 faculty (38 tenure-track and 12 non-tenure-track), and the rest department chairs, administrators, and others. This is a convenience sample without a calculable response rate, so the percentages below describe respondents, not the profession.

On what Extension economists do, there is broad agreement. Faculty respondents average a 45% Extension, 32% research, 18% teaching, and 5% service split. Of the 76 who answered, 88% list developing educational programs as a core responsibility, 86% applied research for stakeholders, 77% decision tools, and 73% engaging policymakers. Asked to rank the skills that matter most, respondents put translating research for non-academic audiences first (mean rank 1.78 out of 6), then communication and public speaking (2.35), then working with industry stakeholders (2.99); data analysis and modeling came fourth (3.94) and grant writing fifth (4.29). In other words, the skills the profession says matter most for Extension are the ones PhD programs teach least.

On prestige, there is also agreement, and it is not flattering.

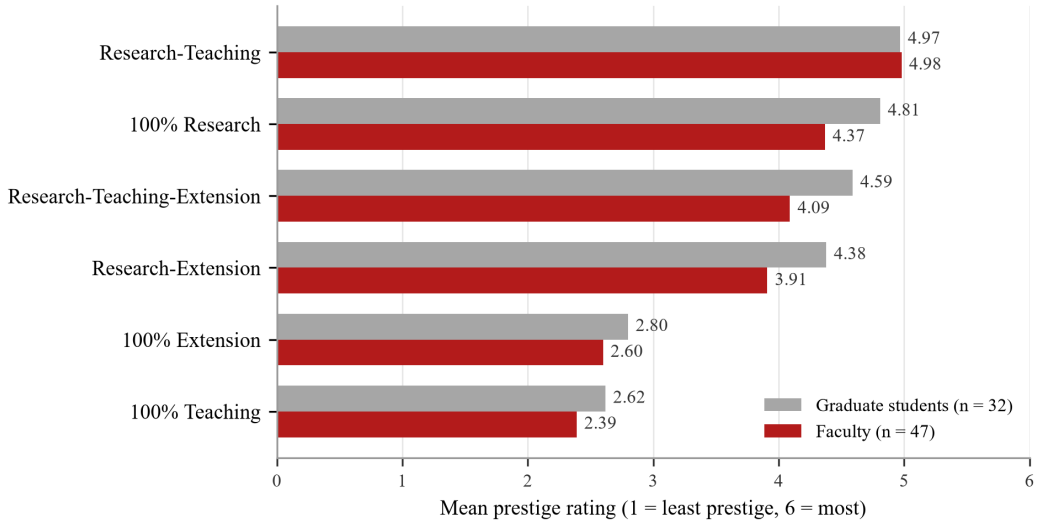


Figure 1. Perceived prestige of faculty appointment types, graduate students vs. faculty

Source: Malone, Carpenter, Bir, Van Leuven, Wasserman-Olin, and Zhang (2026), Table 3. Spring 2025 survey of AAEA Extension Section and Graduate Student Section members; respondents rated each appointment type independently on a 1–6 scale. Student–faculty differences are not statistically significant at the 5% level for any appointment type.

Asked to rate each appointment type from 1 (least prestige) to 6 (most), graduate students and faculty gave nearly identical answers (Figure 1). A research-teaching split scores about 5.0 in both groups. Any appointment that adds Extension falls by half a point to a full point, and a 100% Extension appointment scores 2.8 among students and 2.6 among faculty, essentially tied with 100% teaching at the bottom. More than half of respondents (52%) said Extension economists are "often" treated as second-class citizens in their departments; among graduate students, 60% said so. Asked their ideal role, only 13.7% of the 51 graduate students chose a research-Extension split, against 29.4% for research-teaching. One non-tenure-track respondent put it bluntly: "I wouldn't recommend applying for an Extension position. It's a lot of work with little recognition – neither in terms of prestige nor salary."

The staffing numbers explain part of why. Of 90 respondents describing how their department fills Extension roles, 52% said tenure-track lines, 32% non-tenure-track lines, and 16% said their department is not hiring for Extension at all. My coauthors describe Extension economists as boundary-spanners, judged by research-centric rules while doing stakeholder-driven work. I would put the trap more plainly. The right economic advice to a farmer is often to do nothing, and, as one respondent asked, "How does one report on a phone call helping someone decide to not invest in a bad business plan?" Adoption counts and webinar clicks will never capture that.

3. Why This Matters for New York and Cornell Cooperative Extension

New York is not exempt. Cornell Cooperative Extension reaches all 57 counties and the five boroughs of New York City through county associations staffed by local educators, and those educators depend on a small number of campus-based Dyson faculty and Extension associates for the economics: what a dairy expansion pencils out to, what a solar lease is worth, how a Canadian tariff changes an apple grower's price outlook. Cornell was not among the 19 departments in the salary study, so I have no Cornell-specific number to report. The natural first step is for Dyson and CALS to run the same within-rank comparison on their own payroll, and I would encourage them to. The stakes are recruiting: every vacant Extension line faces the

conversion pressure the survey documents nationally, and the graduate students who would fill those lines are telling us, at 60%, that they see the job as second-class.

4. What Can Be Done

The encouraging part of both studies is that the fixes are mostly administrative. I would start with three.

First, equalize starting salaries. The assistant-level gap of roughly $5,000 is the easiest to close because it is set in a single negotiation. If starting salaries are equal and Extension performance is weighted the same as research and teaching in annual review, the full-professor gap should shrink on its own over time. This costs a department about $5,000 per Extension hire, which is small relative to a failed search.

Second, evaluate Extension work with external peer review that has explicit standing in tenure and promotion, and stop counting clicks and followers. Extension administrators, not only department chairs, should help review committees judge program quality, and reporting frameworks should credit avoided losses and documented responsiveness to stakeholder questions, not only adoption rates. A shared taxonomy of Extension outputs would make this easier for committees that do not know what an "Extension program" is; several experienced faculty in our survey admitted they do not either.

Third, treat converting an Extension line into a research line as a decision that requires written justification, and fund Extension assistantships for graduate students. A third of our respondents' departments staff Extension through non-tenure-track lines and a sixth are not hiring at all; the pipeline problem and the prestige problem are the same problem, and exposure is the cheapest cure. Mykel Taylor, now department head at Auburn, and I made the same argument in Choices in 2019 (https://www.choicesmagazine.org/choices-magazine/theme-articles/the-future-of-farm-management-extension/training-the-next-generation-of-extension-economists), and the survey data now back it up.

None of this requires new money from Albany or Washington. It requires deans and chairs to decide that the Extension discount is a choice rather than a market outcome, and to say so. As one respondent reminded us, "we are one of the few sources offering unbiased information free of angles and gimmicks." That is worth paying for.

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