

profile

Linda Nessel

ISSUE AREA LEADER, WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

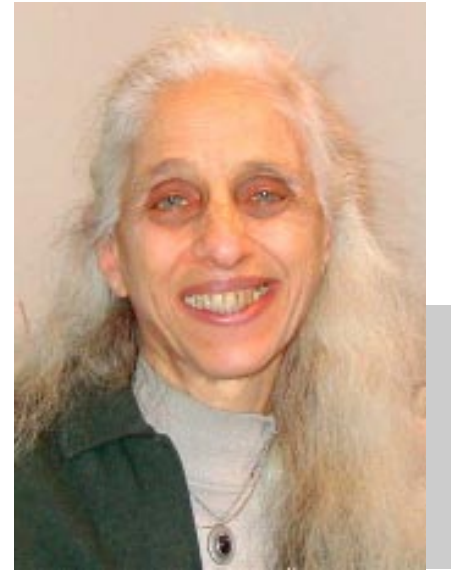
My background is probably not typical in extension, if there is a typical one. I had worked in New York City for probably twenty years in youth development and youth empowerment. My background is actually social work, although I had not been working specifically as a social worker; I had been doing advocacy and public affairs at the YWCA, developing programs. Although I ran coalitions in New York City, I actually had never heard of extension, never heard of 4-H. I just happened to see an ad for this job in the *New York Times*. I applied for a job that was developing a strategic plan and implementing a new plan for youth development in New York City that included 4-H, but was not limited to 4-H. That, as I recall, was my interpretation of the job, which may have been very different from what anyone else had in mind. I thought it would be an interesting way to go, but I had literally never heard of extension. I was even a Cornell graduate and had still never heard of it, so that was part of what was interesting to me.

It was also interesting because there were resources I thought I could bring to youth development groups (community-based organizations) in New York City, which was part of what interested me. I've been here for about twelve years. There probably isn't, even in New York City, a traditional path for how people get to extension; you'll find most of us are odd. With the exception

of Lucinda, who has a very wonderful extension background, the rest of my staff does not come from a traditional extension background. Most of them didn't come to extension in a typical way.

After I graduated from Cornell, I didn't stay connected with Cornell at all until I got this job. I did a lot. I did directories of resources for youth. I did a lot with teen pregnancy and women's issues advocacy. It never occurred to me to look into 4-H. When I looked into it in terms of exploring the job, I was very interested in what they had and what I thought they could have. I think one of Ruth's strengths as director is her interest in pulling in people with non-traditional backgrounds. That's not necessarily what you would want in other places, but you need that approach to respond to the challenges of New York City.

Very soon after I got here, we were running 4-H programs and trying to make them better. I had brought two concerns with me from twenty-five years of working in the city. One was how to build literacy skills so that youth could have choices about careers and higher education. I was especially interested in bringing new resources that didn't involve taking resources from other cbo's [community-based organizations]. The other was how to design programs for the older youth (14- to 16-year-olds). We knew how to involve them when they were young, but didn't know what to do with them when they got older. You have to realize this was also a time of no resources, no summer



Profile developed by Jessica Yancey and Linda Nessel

jobs for youth, no programs for youth, and of very tight resources.

I had been doing a lot of work with literacy before I came to Cornell. One of the things that enticed me most about Cornell were the community educators. I thought that was the greatest resource, people from the community who were going to be giving back to the community. When I was doing the exploratory job search, I had said how wonderful it was that while they were doing nutrition education, they could also be promoting literacy. So I had a tiny grant from someone I knew from before to train the community educators in our Harlem office to incorporate literacy into the nutrition work they were doing. It made perfect sense, and it was terrific. That was probably my first year here. Also in that first year, in the course of meeting with people who were interested in extension in New York City, I met a very interesting man named Joe Holland. He was a Cornell University and Law School graduate and a trustee of the university who was living and working in Harlem. He had gotten connected to extension and was interested in what we did.

Then I got a phone call from Scott McMillan. Scott is a wonderful man; he's on campus and teaches Shakespearean literature. This was the serendipity piece. This didn't come together in a coherent program planning way. It was more of a series of opportunities that happened. Scott had been at Cornell for a very long time in the English department, but he had the strongest commitment that I had encountered to inner-city youth and to getting Cornell students to do something in the community. He applied for and got this tiny faculty fellows grant, which was \$4,000, for Cornell students to teach literacy over the summer.

Scott is a very interesting man; he had gotten involved in the whole di-

vestiture issue. There were a group of people at Cornell who felt that Cornell should not be putting its resources into companies that were doing business in South Africa. He was the one who had taught Joe Holland, so it's a funny combination. Joe is African-American, and Scott had encouraged Joe to run as a trustee on the divestiture issue and had run his whole campaign. So when Scott got this small grant, he called Joe and said, "What should we do in Harlem?" Joe, to his credit, with incredible sanity, wanted to call in extension and see what we might do because we have an office and existing programs in Harlem. At that point, we had a large and very good staff delivering programs in central Harlem.

Scott, like many people, had the idea that if we said that Cornell students were going to teach pregnant mothers to read to their children, then the pregnant mothers would come. I had a conversation with Scott and said that it's not that the mothers don't want to come, it's that they're incredibly distracted. They've got a hundred things going on, so we've got to incorporate it into something that's already going on or they won't come. Scott's a brilliant man who knows all sorts of things, but to his credit, he also knows what he doesn't know and how to listen to it. So he said, "Okay, what do you think makes sense?" We talked about doing something with four Cornell students strongly linked to our nutrition and literacy approaches in central Harlem. So we agreed to do that, and we did a whole planning piece with Joe Holland. We worked with several people, including Bill Saunders, director of after-school programs at Grant Houses [a community center in Harlem], because he was one of our partners up there. So we started, eleven summers ago, with four students, one of whom is still very connected to us.

Each of the four students got

\$1,000. They each worked closely with community educators and others in various settings in Harlem. The community educators would be doing workshops for parents, and the students would read to the children while the workshops were going on. We had a variety of approaches, and by the end of the summer, we could plan with the students and partners (Bill Saunders and others) what we could do and how we could expand it. We have continued from that to refine and expand it to where we usually have about fourteen students every summer. This is a very unusual university-community partnership, but in many ways, I think it's excellent because Scott, as a tenured professor, could do things for us that many of our extension partners have not been able to do. He could get a vice-president (Susan Murphy) to agree that work-study funds could be used. We could get things that I can't get in other ways, and it became a wonderful model. By now, it is pretty solidly structured. With a huge amount of help from the university, we have the program institutionalized. There was a combination of good people in place who got these things going in a way that was so solid that when these good people left, it continued. But it still takes a huge amount of work.

Now, we recruit and hire twelve to fourteen Cornell students. We start with Ujamaa and the Latino Living Center (two residential programs). We don't specifically say that it's minorities we want. It's people who have the interest and ability to work with the community. We do take, for the most part, only those who are work-study eligible because work-study pays half of their salary. In the course of this, we discovered that there was a Presidential Reading Fund that came out of the Clinton administration, where if the president of the university agreed, then money could go to match the work-study, so

that students get their whole salaries paid. But the deal is that the students have to do work on literacy that targets youth below the age of twelve. We used to do more with teens; now we focus on the younger youth, although we still find other ways to involve the teens.

So we have a relationship with the work-study office. We advertise the jobs. Edwin Román, resource educator with workforce development, goes up to campus the first week in April and usually sees about fifty students who apply. Of those, we usually choose fourteen, and we place them in literacy-promoting jobs over the summer in Brooklyn, Manhattan and the Bronx, and even some in Queens. These are all neighborhoods that we're working with, groups that we're working with. Some are in 4-H programs, but most are in summer day camps and housing projects where we have strong commitments and relationships.

We train the students for two weeks, together with community partners, people like Bill Saunders. Then they work in the settings four days a week. On Fridays, they're in our office and we do a series of problem solving and reflection with them. The students keep reflective journals that we review too. And we do professional development for them, because as students they still need help figuring out both what they want to do next and how they can incorporate some public service in their lives. We don't try to push them into public service; the students are going to do what they're going to do. But we try to help them see that even if they go into the corporate setting, there are still ways in which they can be informed voters, they can leverage resources for our issue and commit to our programs in some ways, at least know the issues. We actually stay involved with a lot of them. Many of them go into teaching and law, but many of them go work for

Soloman Smith Barney and make more than the rest of us together. They have to do that to pay back their student loans, so it's complicated.

The main purpose of starting this program was to improve the reading and writing skills of younger youth in New York City who were not getting a lot of help and who were not getting help in ways that were fun. Over the summer, they were getting what they were not getting in school. They often had been so put down by the traditional approaches that we tried to train them in

Extension education ... is a way of bringing the resources of a university to the community and making sure that it's a real two-way street where communities who know their needs and have done a lot of their own research can get it to the university people. Whether or not the university people listen is another story.

reading, writing and other literacy-promoting techniques. We also tried to use their energy to come up with things that were fun and exciting, and demonstrate that reading and writing and critical thinking are fun and important. We wanted to specifically use role models from similar backgrounds who left the neighborhood, but could come back and give back. That was a huge dilemma then and remains a dilemma. It's the issue of people feeling, "If I go ahead and I get my college degree, will everyone say that I'm getting too good for my neighborhood to do anything?" So seeing these attractive, energetic, wonderful young people who were getting the benefits of college was really important. So our goal was to promote reading and writing in the younger youth. Our second goal was also to bring in

the resource of role models who were from similar backgrounds. The third goal was to help the Cornell students understand more about the needs of the communities for reading and writing and literacy promoting programs and to be able to use that in their future careers. We also had a goal of improving literacy in the community, but that's not realistic — given our finite resources and the enormity and complexity of the issue. We do what we can do considering the needs. The thought that having two students there for six weeks over the summer is going to change the way services go on is unrealistic.

Whether or not we work with the same kids every summer is part of the challenge. It depends on the setting we're working in. In Grant Houses, often they're able to follow the same kids because the same kids come back. But in some of our other settings, they have new groups of youth every summer. Edwin is already meeting with our partners to ask, "Where do you need our students? What's the best use of them?" It's really up to them. So sometimes, even though we would like for them to be in the same class so they can follow the same kids, the community partner will say, "We really need you with the four-year-olds." When they can follow the same youth, it's great. We have tried to bring back some of the Cornell students. We don't say it's a requirement, but some of them have been with us three summers. You find that when a student has the opportunity, even not to teach the same kids again, but to interact with them, it helps both the Cornell student and the younger youth who often feel that everyone abandons them. One of the students who had been at Grant Houses several times told this wonderful story

of sitting on the train; one of the kids came up to him and said, “I remember two years ago when we were going to the zoo and you showed me how to read that sign. It made such a difference to me.” Sometimes it takes time to see a difference; the frustration is that we can’t always guarantee that you can follow the same kids, which would be better programmatically if we could.

The program has evolved over the past twelve years; it’s very different today. Every year, we do a lot of exit interviews and ongoing interviews with the students as well as with our community partners and try to retool and refine it for the next summer based on what we heard the summer before. It’s probably a bit more structured than it was in its earlier years. In the earlier years, we treated the Cornell students as total pioneers. It’s a bit more organized, although there are always surprises. The biggest difference is the interest in continuing during the year. The Cornell students, who are totally committed, are willing to stay involved online, which is the best way for students 250 long miles away. We had this approach going with other places like Marist College, where students could connect online with teens in the community. A Marist faculty person is overseeing the project. The Cornell students want to do the same thing, but it has been challenging because we need a Cornell faculty person supervising the Cornell student reflection sessions. John Ford, the former dean of students, did it last semester, but then he got lured away to Emory University. Then we couldn’t find anyone who felt they had the time, and it’s exhausting. This is my huge frustration. There’s no process for linking with someone, and I’ve spent two years trying to get someone to agree to do it. At least Cornell students could have a community connection with the older teens, instead of just parachuting in for the summer and then

leaving. And if we could do it with the younger students, that would be even better.

The program has definitely changed; it’s gotten more solid. We have had Grant Houses and Phipps Community Development Corporation with us as partners from the start. New Settlement Apartments in the Bronx have also been with us from almost the start. But we have added more of the 4-H programs through connections with churches and libraries. That is a newer piece that works very well as long as we have Cornell students who are a little bit older and more comfortable with ambiguity, because it’s a little less structured in many ways. We have different partners depending on who approaches us and what they need and want. I think that it’s become more institutionalized on campus with Work Study and other resources. We have a good connection with the Public Service Center up on campus, and they’ve been wonderful, too. I think they’ve been without a permanent director, so things are always a little fuzzy up there. We have the right players, but things that should be easy are frequently never easy.

We talk to the parents of the kids we’re working with, and we would like to do even more with parents. That has been a big thrust of ours. We always have at least one event where we invite the parents in to see the work of the children. Last year, when we did the newsletter, we did a page of resources for parents. We would like to do even more with them. It’s hard because the parents aren’t there during the day; but it is something we very consciously want to do more and more. With literacy — and anything else — it’s layer after layer. If you can’t help the parents see the importance, it’s very hard to sustain it. The best approaches are where you help parents help their children. And we have other programs

through which we try to do that, and we’ve tried to do that with this one. Because of our approach of working through host settings, it depends more on the approach of the host setting too. That’s one of the things the Cornell students always have to balance with our help. One of the things that is very hard for the Cornell students is that they’re our employees, but they are placed in community settings and have to go with all the different rules and regulations and the corporate culture. So if they’re in a setting that isn’t parent friendly, they can’t say, “I’m a Cornell student and I want to invite the parents in.” It’s a dilemma, but one that we care about a great deal. We’re doing other approaches with parents, too, because we know we need to. We’re trying to do a whole digital scholars piece with ninth graders through college, helping them prepare. We want to add a parent component to that, too. With Cornell, you have this patchwork quilt of programs; wherever you have some resources, you try to plug it in.

Evaluation is always one of the trickiest things. We have used a variety of approaches. One year Merrill Ewert, then a professor in the Education department and later the director of Cornell Cooperative Extension, and Dave Deshler, then a professor in the Education department, trained the students in participatory research techniques. Then Merrill and Dave did the evaluation. But it was very resource intensive. We also try to count things like the number of youth we impact and the products that come out of it. I have never thought that it made sense to say that youth would improve their reading skills by X amount. It’s just not going to happen, and I wouldn’t want us to be judged in that way. What we want to measure is that the youth like reading and writing, see its relevance to their current and future lives, and see other ways that they can go about it.

We also do a newsletter every year, we incorporate both the Cornell students' work and the work of the students in the community. We distribute that. It's not a perfect evaluation, but we do try to at least document the impact — numbers reached, products they develop — at some level. The Cornell students also keep reflective journals that tell us different things about impact.

The most challenging part, really, was matching up resources with an immense, immense need. Especially twelve years ago, there were no resources around; there were thousands of needs. How could you best focus four students? We said we would only do central Harlem. The challenge is that sometimes funding dictates where you go and what you do. One of the pieces that we built in after the first year, which I had always done and loved, was training and hiring teens to work along with the Cornell students. It would be their summer job. They would learn literacy, and they would learn peer education approaches. That was a really interesting piece. As the funds became more and more targeted to the younger youth, we didn't have the funds to hire these teens ourselves. We sometimes were able to get outside funds and do it that way. There are challenges to having college students work with teenagers and younger youth simultaneously. It works really well if you have good teens, but there was this tension when we say "youth to youth." What youth are we talking about in a multi-layered program? Interestingly, the Cornell students were much more comfortable working with younger youth than with the teens. The teens were closer in age, but they were also often very challenging. The younger ones adored them; the teens could be, "What the hell do you know?" For the Cornell students, there's so much ambivalence about setting rules, the teens don't arrive on time, etc.

There was a huge tension handling those near-age issues. So it's figuring out what to do with your resources and keeping the program vibrant as needs and resources change in the community. And the biggest challenge to me is what happens the rest of the year. That's where we have tried to do the Youth Net approach as an outgrowth, but that's been quite challenging in terms of university-community partnerships.

One really important lesson I've learned from this program is that the Cornell students have wonderful priorities, wonderful energy. It's much more difficult to get faculty involved than to get the students involved. So that was our most challenging lesson. The stu-

I see my work as brokering, bringing together people who wouldn't typically come together. ... Bringing together the usual people is fine, but it doesn't seem like it's going to produce anything but the usual program.

dents were wonderful; they had all sorts of things they wanted to do in the future. This is not meant as a criticism. I'm trying to be very philosophical. Because the program was conceptualized and designed in a very non-traditional way, faculty — at least extension faculty — didn't see it as their program. Scott McMillin has always been interested, but he's a Shakespearean literature professor. A very smart woman who was the director of Cornell Cooperative Extension two directors before, Cindy Nobel, had said to me, "Linda, you're never going to get any place with this unless somebody on campus takes it on and sees it as something they want to write about. Universities don't believe it unless it's written in their journals. It can be written up in other

things, but they don't pay attention to that." Because it's not a traditional extension program (and it's not a traditional anything else program), everybody loves it, but nobody on campus takes it on in some ways. That's challenging, which is why I'm glad you're profiling it. Part of my agenda is to get people to take it on because it's not enough to have me pushing from my end. You want it to be solid enough that even if we all disappear tomorrow, it will continue. That, I think, is the real challenge.

I do not see myself as a teacher in this program. I see myself more as the strategic planner, pulling the pieces together and bringing resources together. I am not a teacher. I do teach in other settings, but that is not what I came to extension to do. So, for instance, in the very first year, I used the little bit of funds that I had to hire some colleagues from a literacy assistance center to come in and do the teaching and training. We also had others from a service learning group do a manual.

I have hired people to do the teaching. Edwin and Lucinda do some of the direct teaching of the Cornell students. That is not a role I see as mine. I would call myself more of an organizer.

Defining extension education is a difficult thing to do. I think what works is to say that it's a way of bringing the resources of a university to the community and making sure that it's a real two-way street where communities who know their needs and have done a lot of their own research can get it to university people. Whether or not the university people listen is another story. Some listen and incorporate both the research and needs into their work and bring resources that help communities do what they need to get done. That was my hope of what extension should

be. I'm not saying that's what I think it is, but if I want to talk about what I think is good about extension, it is that there are these people out there in the community who really know what their neighborhood needs. The community educators and others can tell us. My staff goes out and works in the community everyday. They know what the needs are, they know what the resources are, and if it really is a two-way channel, they can get university resources to respond to this. I think that's what extension should be.

There are some downsides to extension. I think that many people in leadership roles in extension, although they talk the talk of it being a two-way channel, really only see it as a one-way channel. Programs and research are developed on the campus and then given to extension to implement. And there are places where that may work beautifully, but it just doesn't work in New York City. I'm sure that people are tired of us saying that New York City is different, but other places are different too. I don't think it's just New York City; I'm sure rural Texas is different too. There are some wonderful programs that are developed, and we certainly use them, but every one of them has to be modified. The only staff that I hire are those I believe can really modify and tailor things knowing what's needed here. The pitfall is that I think academics spend an incredible amount of time talking and thinking about strategic and long-range plans and much less time acting. I am, good or bad, very action-oriented. There are lots of needs out there, and I don't think it's so terrible to do something. And if it doesn't work, you do it differently rather than stopping. I think the traditional extension model, which is a very good model, is that you plan it, you get every piece in place, you don't launch it until you have everything conceptualized and have everything dotted. Sometimes by

the time you finish it, all of the needs of the community have shifted. So that's my personal frustration.

When I hire people, I look for a real commitment to and caring for the community. I'm much more interested in that than anything. When I was hired, my unit was the youth development unit. Over a long evolution, it became workforce development, including youth. But those are both areas where you don't go and get your master's in that. And I found it makes absolutely no difference what educational major someone pursued; it's much more their ability to see, to hear, to listen and care.

My colleague, John Nettleton, often talks about our approach to Cornell being like a scavenger hunt. We go up there and see if there's anyone interesting who wants to work with us, even though it's not in their job description.

And the other thing that I look for a lot is people who can focus because it's such a scattering sort of place. There are some wonderful people whom I've worked with in other settings, but I wouldn't bring them in to this because they would be out of their minds. You need people who can say, "There's this possibility and this possibility, but this is what I can do and by this time." I look for diversity, not because it's the right thing to do, but because it enriches our programs. We really need it across all lines. I wish I could bring in more having to do with disability, which is another strong commitment. I think there are lots and lots of issues, and I don't think one person should have to represent women's issues, or gay issues, or this, that, or the other. I think if you have a staff with a lot of different perspectives and the ability to speak out

and say what they think, you can have a rich program. I don't want a robot that says "Yes, that's right." That doesn't do me any good. Maybe this is not traditionally how one hires, but it is how I hire. We always hire by committee and try to include community representatives as well as staff from all issue areas and levels. We look for somebody who won't race out of here screaming after a week.

Where we get our resources vastly controls what we do with the programs, but not totally, because we have a commitment to it. The resources are pretty much in place on this one, although we

have gotten outside funding. We have one person whose daughter and husband went to Cornell. She has a tremendous interest in literacy. The person at Cornell's College of Human Ecology who dealt with funding asked if this woman could come down and meet with us. She did, and she loved our program. She has set up a small

fund where the interest on it goes to support a staff person; part of Edwin's salary is paid from that. We need that because this is in addition to the traditional extension work. We've found that in order for the program to work, we have to have someone focusing on it. It wasn't enough to bring in someone to run it over the summer. So we really needed the commitment to some funding for a staff person to incorporate this into their year-round work. And we have gotten a little bit of funding — not enough, but a little bit of funding — from Cornell, and that helps a great deal. So without the resources for part of someone's salary, who is focused on this program, I think we would have a very difficult time having a quality program, even though many of the pieces are in place.

If I could change one thing about

this program, I would make it year-round. I would build on the impact. I think we do wonderful things over the summer. I would actually like to have students from local colleges who were getting work-study who could continue working with these youth during the year. It's a very sane thing to do if you could just get the sun, the moon and the stars to line up. But it takes a huge amount of time to do that sort of planning, even though it's very simple and very sane. You're dealing with bureaucracies, and who will work with whom, who's focusing on what.

This program has helped me personally evolve as an extension employee. It's the one that confirms part of why I came to extension, which was to bring university resources to the city. I had always worked in small community-based organizations. And my fantasy in going to Cornell was I didn't want to be competing against these groups and these coalitions I had built. I didn't want to be going after the same grants they were. So I thought, "This is wonderful. I'll have a new way to bring a new pool of resources and different resources where they weren't before." It's not that I can write a better proposal than the YWCA, it's that I can bring something different there. This one is the one that really makes me feel good because it really has brought the resources from the university that never

would have been in place without it. They are not extension resources; I'm not even sure whether extension has put any resources into this one. But it's the faculty fellows. It's the work-study students. It's the Public Service Center, and it is access to people who did provide funding for us whom we never would have come into contact with. So it's one that has confirmed the notion that you can get resources from the university that really are willing to respond to what the community needs. But in all the programs we do, when you ask people what they want, it's better education for their kids and better jobs. This one has managed to confirm that there are university resources that are appropriate in the community and that work and that really make lives a little better.

So in some ways, the Youth-to-Youth Literacy Program has been one of the more satisfying programs. It also has been a way of using really good staff. Lucinda has done the most amazing job of teaching literacy. Again, faculty would say she wasn't taught and trained in "literacy-teaching," but she's a much better teacher than your traditional faculty. Edwin is just wonderful, and he takes teaching very seriously. So it's a wonderful program where people with a variety of different backgrounds really are making a difference. It makes me feel a little better about the possi-

bility. It then can be very frustrating that you can't get other people to do other similarly sane things, but at least something gets done. And I think it's very good for the university; they love to talk about it.

I see my work as brokering, bringing together people who wouldn't typically come together. My colleague, John Nettleton, often talks about our approach to Cornell being like a scavenger hunt. We go up there and see if there's anyone interesting who wants to work with us, even though it's not in their job description. I do think what extension does best is the brokering, especially if we bring together people who normally wouldn't come in contact with each other. Bringing together the usual people is fine, but it doesn't seem like it's going to produce anything but the usual programs. I have strong feelings that we're still in a huge amount of trouble in many of our NYC communities. I'm deeply concerned. Skipping the economy, which is only going to get worse, and the fact that nobody we work with benefited from it anyway, and the growing stratification which I think is really scary for our society. I think there are real things that the university and extension could do about it. I think we need to be doing a great deal more rather than revitalizing ourselves or just talking about it.