

Food Systems Leadership Institute – Leadership Project Summary

Project Title: Building the University of Maryland Extension's Strategic Plan Through Engagement and Collaboration

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Issue/Challenge

University of Maryland Extension (UME) has long held a strong reputation for delivering trusted, innovative, and community-relevant programming. UME has impactful, award-winning programs, dedicated, competent faculty and staff, and sustainable support from the college and university. However, the organization has faced growing challenges, including limited capacity, increasingly diverse community needs, and limited departmental data on program impacts and operations. For example, the last strategic plan was developed in 2014. The last staffing plan was dated 2011. These challenges were compounded by operational efficiency, a lack of alignment between the campus and community, and the absence of consistent mechanisms to connect leadership with stakeholder voices. UME recognized a need to develop a new, inclusive, and sustainable strategic plan that could navigate both internal and external demands, including staffing recruitment and retention, budget reductions, and evolving stakeholder expectations.

Project Objectives

- Develop a transparent, inclusive, and data-informed strategic planning process.
- Engage internal and external stakeholders statewide to co-create the future direction of UME.
- Build leadership capacity within UME to support effective plan implementation.
- Foster a culture of collaboration, shared leadership, and accountability throughout the organization.

Before the Strategic Plan

Beginning in 2022, UME was emerging from operational disruptions caused by COVID-19 and the expiration of its previous strategic plan. In August 2023, UME initiated a self-directed unit review, which included the formation of a committee, internal and external surveys, the preparation of a comprehensive report, an external reviewers' visit, and a final report. This period also included key team member hiring and team-building to strengthen organizational capacity. Moving into 2024, the strategic plan development phase integrated key findings from the unit review, as well as insights from the USDA Civil Rights Review. The strategic plan also needed to address significant challenges, such as state budget reductions and continued team-building efforts.

Approach

This leadership project launched a data-informed, engaged, and collaborative strategic planning development.

Data-Informed

- Unit Review
- Data on Extension Programming, Research, and Service
- Organizational Capacity
- Operations

- Financial Information
- Civil Rights Review
- University Strategic Plan

Engaged

- Internal, External Surveys
- Workforce Climate Surveys
- Town Halls & Listening Sessions
- Memos
- Newsletters
- Press Releases
- Exhibits and Conferences

Collaborative (Leadership)

- Committee representatives of programs, regions, demographics, and on/off-campus
- External Consultants
- Interim Leaders
- Extension Advisory Councils

What We Have Done

Key actions included:

- Formation of a Strategic Planning Committee with monthly steering meetings since the September 2024 kickoff.
- Comprehensive data review, including surveys, internal self-studies (2023–2024), and benchmarking with peer Extension systems.
- Statewide engagement efforts, such as:
 - 15 external town halls (in-person and virtual) with 259 participants.
 - 7 internal listening sessions involving 120 participants.
- Strategic planning retreat held on March 6, 2025, to synthesize insights and establish core priorities.
- All-Extension online breakout sessions and continuous feedback opportunities via surveys and newsletters.
- Development of the UME strategic plan
- Development of next-step strategies including implementation timelines, a five-year programmatic plan, leadership development goals, operational efficiency initiatives, and a sustainable staffing roadmap.

UME Strategic Plan

Mission: University of Maryland Extension (UME) empowers people and communities to improve their lives by offering transformative, science-based education and leading collaborative partnerships across Maryland and beyond.

Vision: The University of Maryland Extension (UME) will be known for addressing the most pressing challenges facing our communities through responsive education and resources, impactful research and innovative collaboration.

1. Deliver Responsive, Research-Based Knowledge

Goal: Provide trusted, research-based solutions in our areas of expertise that help Marylanders address critical challenges and create new opportunities.

STRATEGIC FOCUS AREAS

- Integrate Agriculture, Food, and Health
- Promote Environmental Stewardship
- Empower Marylanders through Lifelong Learning

2. Expand Extension's Reach and Visibility Across Maryland

Goal: Establish the University of Maryland Extension as THE trusted and preferred source of research-based information, solutions, and support for audiences across the state.

3. Foster Meaningful Partnerships and a Culture of Collaboration

Goal: Establish and expand strong partnerships with communities, stakeholders and the University of Maryland campus by fostering a culture of collaboration.

4. Support, Develop, and Sustain Talent

Goal: Equip employees with the tools, resources, and support needed to advance the UME mission and achieve their professional goals.

The strategic planning process re-engaged extension faculty, staff, and stakeholders, increased connection, and cultivated a shared sense of purpose. The strategic plan identified strategic priority areas. It would strengthen partnerships between UME and UMD campus units in research, student affairs, and community engagement. The plan will prioritize operational improvements, including communications, onboarding, and interdisciplinary collaboration. The new plan would position UME to be more responsive, adaptive, and visible.

Lessons from FSLI

Participation in FSLI provided valuable insights into personal leadership reflection, communication strategies, and stakeholder engagement. Core takeaways included:

- The importance of building the right team and fostering a "culture of conversation."
- Effective communication: The power of intuition, sensing, and structured thinking in leading complex systems change.
- Value in peer coaching and mentoring to build confidence and adaptive leadership capacity.
- The necessity of aligning vision with operations to ensure sustainability in times of uncertainty.

Summary

This FSLI project facilitated a transformative strategic planning process for the University of Maryland Extension by establishing an inclusive, data-informed strategic planning project. It not only addressed operational and structural gaps but also shared a vision among faculty, staff, and leadership. Through meaningful engagement and collaborative design, UME now has a strong foundation to deliver impactful, community-centered programming into the future.