



Cooperative Extension in State Policy: Roles, Structures, and Opportunities for State Higher Education Leaders



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Purpose and Framing

Understanding Cooperative Extension's Role in State Higher Education

State higher education executive officers (SHEEOs) are increasingly asked to leverage public higher education to advance state goals related to workforce development, rural prosperity, adult learning, and community well-being. Across the states, SHEEOs are positioned to lead in these areas through their role in governing and coordinating a state's varied higher education assets. One long-standing but overlooked tool within the SHEEO's toolbox is the Cooperative Extension system[1].

Cooperative Extension is a public service mission of land-grant universities that translates research into practical, community-based solutions. It was established through federal legislation over a century ago and is sustained through a shared federal, state, and local partnership. Extension operates in every state and territory and maintains a physical presence in thousands of communities nationwide. Despite its scale and reach, Extension's role in state higher education policy can be implicit, fragmented, or poorly understood, particularly among state higher education agencies. This risks underutilization of Extension as a tool to advance higher education's objectives, especially in rural communities.

[1] In this paper, we use the following terminology related to Extension: "Extension system" represents an institution's (or a state's combined land-grant institutions where there are more than one) entire extension effort – including its partnerships; "Extension service" is an institution's extension work, mainly its funded, direct efforts; this could also be "Cooperative Extension Service" or "Cooperative Extension;" "Extension office" refers to a local office; "Extension" is a general way to refer to the system; "extension" is the work.

This policy brief aims to help SHEEOs understand the governance and funding of Cooperative Extension across states, as well as how state policy decisions affect Extension's visibility, accountability, and alignment with broader state priorities. An appendix to this brief includes a description of how Extension appears in statute in all fifty states to aid in deepening understanding within specific state contexts. Building on this baseline knowledge about Extension, we also provide recommended state strategies to consider.



Key Takeaways

Cooperative Extension can be an underutilized higher education asset.

State policy choices shape how Extension can be leveraged towards broader statewide goals.

Statutory framing for Extension varies widely. Some states explicitly connect Extension to rural development, workforce, or higher education goals, while others embed Extension authority within policies pertaining to the land-grant institution.

Funding models affect both Extension's stability and its capacity to support workforce and community programming.

Across all state contexts, greater alignment between Extension and state higher education strategy is achievable.

How Extension Works: A Federal, State, Local, and Institutional Partnership

At a high level, Cooperative Extension operates through a shared governance and funding model involving federal, state, local, and institutional policies.

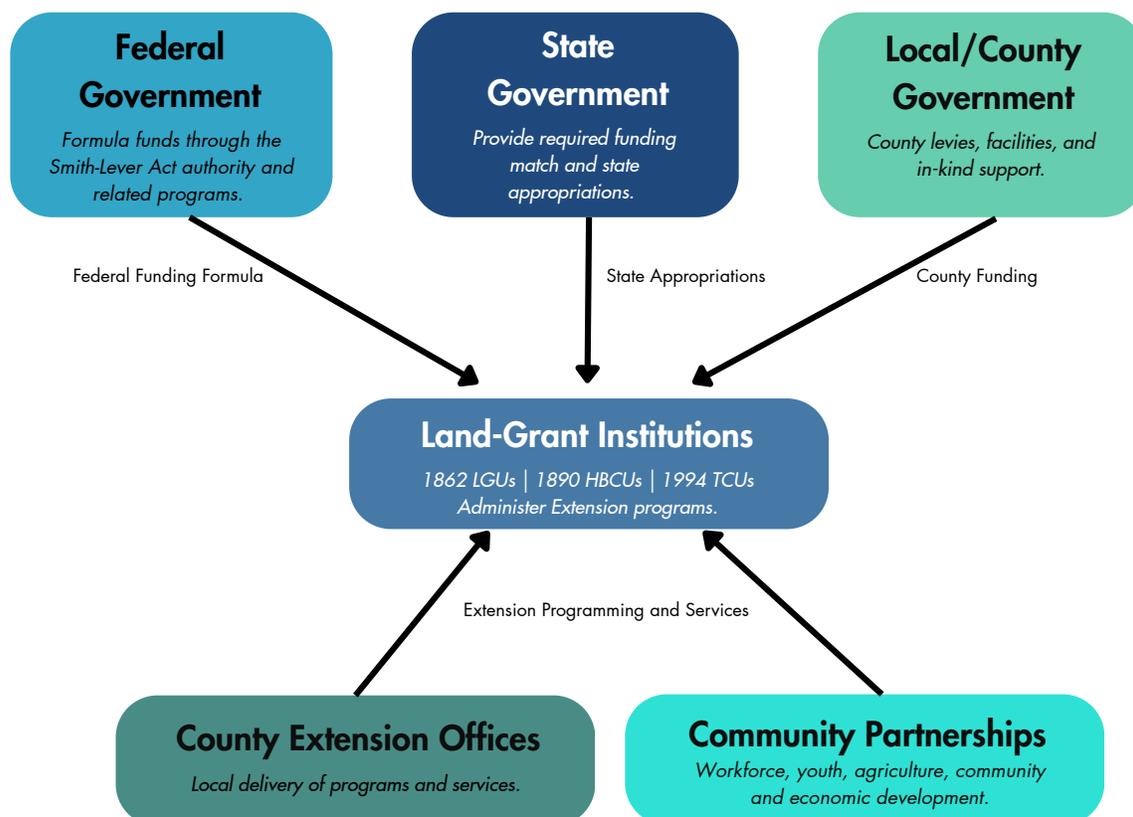
Key components of this partnership include:

- Federal leadership, primarily through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), which provides foundational authority and funding through the Smith–Lever Act and related programs.

- State governments, which typically provide required funding matches, establish statutory authority, and define Extension’s relationship to state systems related to higher education, agriculture, workforce development, and rural policy.
- Local governments, particularly counties, which, in many states, provide direct funding, governance structures, or both, shaping Extension’s local presence and responsiveness.
- Land-grant institutions themselves, including those originally established in 1862, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) added in 1890, and tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) added in 1994. These institutions make decisions regarding the implementation of federal, state, and local Extension policies. These decisions impact the organization, funding, and overall programmatic scope of Extension.

Across states, Extension may be housed within different institutional units, such as colleges of agriculture, state-wide Extension offices, or other administrative structures. These differences are documented in organizational analyses that highlight variation in leadership alignment, reporting relationships, and administrative placement across land-grant systems[2], including recent NCHEMS work on Extension’s role in supporting rural and workforce development.

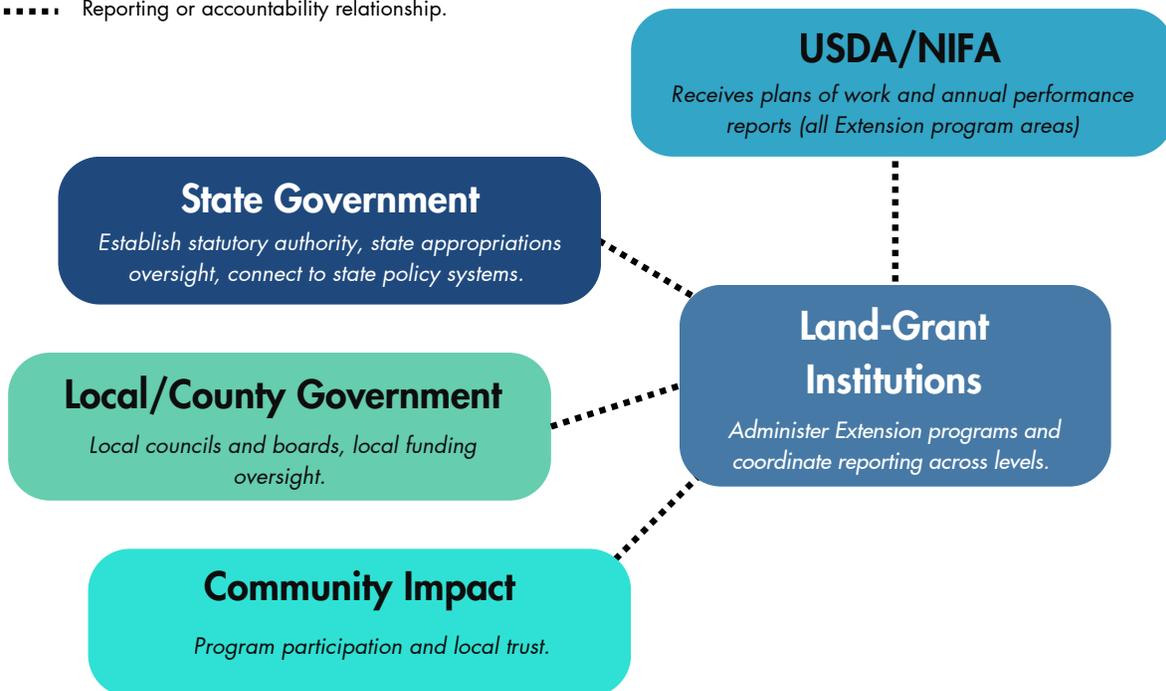
Figure 1: How Cooperative Extension Funding Flows Work



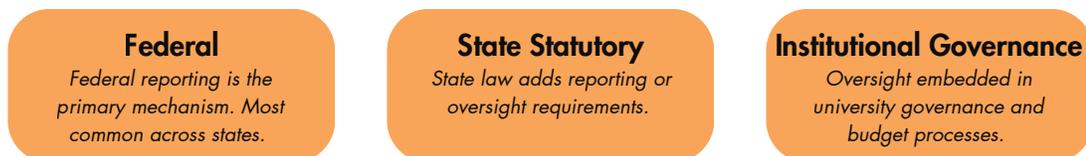
Cooperative Extension operates through a partnership among federal, state, local, and institutional actors. Funding flows from federal, state, and local sources to land-grant institutions, which administer Extension programming delivered through county-based offices and community partnerships. See the infographics on how funding flows (Figure 1) and the accountability/oversight work at the federal, state, and local levels (Figure 2).

Figure 2: How Cooperative Extension Accountability Works

..... Reporting or accountability relationship.



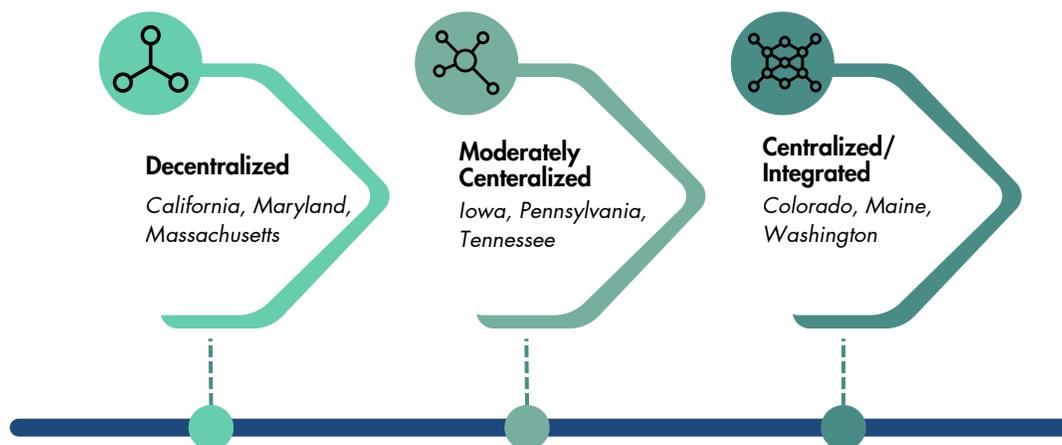
Accountability Looks Different Across States



Why State Policy Context Matters

Although Extension's federal foundation is consistent nationwide, states exercise considerable discretion in how they recognize, support, and integrate Extension into their own policy frameworks. As a result, Extension's role and scope vary significantly across states.

Figure 3: State Integration of Extension in Policy Frameworks



States tend to fall along a spectrum:

- Decentralized states, where Extension policy is limited largely to meeting federal requirements and providing required funding matches.
- Moderately centralized states, where Extension is subject to additional state oversight, such as reporting requirements or advisory structures.
- Centralized states, where Extension is embedded within broader state strategies related to agriculture, workforce development, rural prosperity, or higher education governance.

These differences influence Extension's visibility within state government, the stability and predictability of funding, accountability to policymakers, and the extent to which Extension is positioned as a strategic partner rather than a standalone service.

Why This Matters for SHEEOs

For SHEEOs, Extension presents both an opportunity and a challenge. In many rural communities, Extension is a trusted and familiar service with long-standing relationships. It engages people across the age spectrum, from youth in 4H to people seeking information and certifications, such as Master Gardener, later in life. In some cases, Extension may be more trusted than higher education institutions or systems, and people may not immediately associate it with a land-grant institution. Indeed, in some contexts, Extension maintains its distinct role and identity, which is valued and respected.

This dynamic raises important questions for state higher education leaders, including:

- How might Extension help strengthen connections between higher education systems and rural communities?
- What role could Extension play in advancing workforce development, adult learning, and economic development goals?
- How do existing state policies enable or limit Extension's ability to serve as a bridge between higher education and community needs?

SHEEOs are well-positioned to engage these questions. Doing so requires familiarity with how Extension operates and how it is governed. Reviewing Extension plans of work, understanding federal reporting requirements, and examining state statutory frameworks are important starting points for examining ways to more meaningfully integrate Extension's work into statewide higher education strategies and plans.

Purpose of Brief

This brief synthesizes findings from a 50-state policy scan and working group materials to support SHEEOs in navigating Extension's policy landscape. It is designed to help state higher education leaders:

- Understand how Cooperative Extension is structured and funded across states.
- Identify key policy differences that shape Extension's role and visibility.
- Recognize opportunities to better align Extension with state higher education and workforce priorities.

Rather than offering prescriptive recommendations, the brief highlights policy patterns, models, and considerations intended to support informed state-level dialogue and decision-making.

Recent NCHEMS work has highlighted Extension's potential contributions to workforce development and rural economic resilience through land-grant institutions[3]. This brief builds on that work by examining how state policy frameworks shape Extension's visibility, funding, and strategic alignment across states.

[3] [Serving Rural America Through Land-Grant Colleges & Universities: Unlocking the Workforce Development Potential of Extension Services](#)

To ground the analysis that follows, the next section provides an overview of how Cooperative Extension is governed and funded across federal, state, and local levels. Establishing this shared baseline is an important first step for understanding why Extension's role and visibility vary so widely across states. With that context in place, the brief then examines how different states have recognized Extension in their statutes, funding structures, accountability mechanisms, and strategic alignment with broader state priorities.



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How Cooperative Extension is Governed and Funded

Cooperative Extension operates through a partnership across federal, state, local, and institutional levels. While the federal framework provides consistent authority nationwide, states and localities have discretion in how Extension is structured, funded, and integrated into their policy systems. Ultimately, land-grant institutions are responsible for implementing these policies.

Federal Framework

Cooperative Extension was established through the Smith–Lever Act (1914), which created a partnership between the USDA and land-grant institutions to deliver research-based education to communities. Under this framework:

- Federal funds are distributed to institutions based on statutory formulas and program requirements.
- Institutions submit plans of work that outline priorities and activities to the USDA, and, where applicable, their states[4].
- Institutions submit annual reports to USDA covering all federally supported Extension activities, including but not limited to youth development (e.g., 4-H), agriculture and natural resources, family and consumer sciences, and community and economic development programming.

The federal framework creates shared expectations across all states. But it does not determine how Extension is organized or positioned within a state’s broader governance or policy system. There are also variances in the implementation of federal policies at the state and institutional level, which are explored in the sections to follow.

State Role

States play a central role in shaping Extension’s internal structure and policy context. Key state-level actions include:

- Appropriating required matching funds for federal Extension dollars.
- Establishing state-level statutory authority for Extension, which varies in its degree of centralization and direction.
- Defining relationships between Extension and other state agencies or policy domains, such as higher education, agriculture, workforce development, or rural affairs.

State choices about statutory language, governance structures, and administrative placement influence how Extension interacts with state-level planning, budgeting, reporting, and cross-agency collaboration.

[4] [NIFA Reporting System](#)

Local and County Role

Local governments, particularly counties, are an important part of the Extension partnership in many states. Local involvement may include:

- Providing funding or facilities for Extension offices.
- Establishing governance mechanisms, such as local Extension councils or boards.
- Coordinating with state-level administrators to implement programs.

The degree and form of local involvement vary across states. Some states authorize specific local funding mechanisms or local governance structures, while in others, local support is provided through discretionary appropriations or administrative arrangements.

Institutional Placement

Extension services are delivered through land-grant institutions, including 1862 land-grant universities, 1890 HBCUs, and 1994 TCUs. The internal organization of Extension can differ significantly.

The internal organization of Extension varies across institutions, but all Extension systems operate with a statewide mission and designated leadership. In some cases, Extension is structured as a centralized, systemwide unit with leadership reporting directly to senior university administration (e.g., Georgia; Nebraska).

In others, Extension leadership is housed within an academic college, such as agriculture or natural resources, while still maintaining statewide coordination and programming responsibilities. In states with multiple land-grant institutions, Extension systems may operate separately but coordinate locally or share advisory structures (e.g., Tennessee; Virginia).

Hybrid models may distribute responsibilities across multiple units or campuses. For example, in Tennessee, the University of Tennessee and Tennessee State University maintain separate Extension systems but collaborate at the county level and share advisory structures. Similarly, in North Carolina, North Carolina State University and North Carolina A&T State University operate coordinated Extension systems with shared programming responsibilities across the state and share advisory structures.

These institutional placements influence leadership alignment, visibility within the university, and the extent of integration with broader institutional strategies related to research, teaching, and public service.

Implications for Higher Education Leaders

For state higher education leaders, understanding Extension's governing and funding architecture is essential before examining variation in policy frameworks. The federal baseline creates a consistent starting point, but state-level statutory language, funding patterns, and institutional placement shape how Extension operates within each state. These structural elements can affect how readily Extension can be aligned with statewide higher education priorities, workforce goals, and community engagement strategies.

As states continue to pursue workforce alignment, rural resilience, and postsecondary attainment goals, Cooperative Extension represents an established but variably positioned asset within state systems.



Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library.

How States Statutorily Recognize Cooperative Extension

Although Cooperative Extension operates under a consistent federal framework, states differ in how Extension appears in their own laws. These differences reflect legislative structure and governance design, but not necessarily levels of commitment to Extension's mission and goals. How Extension is framed in statute can influence its visibility, clarity of authority, and connection to other state policy priorities.

Three common statutory framing approaches emerge from the 50-state scan.

1. Distinct and Direct Statutory References

In many states, statutes explicitly reference "Cooperative Extension" or "Extension work" as a defined function of the land-grant institution. These provisions often authorize the establishment of Extension agents and county offices, outline the formation of Extension districts or local boards, and define the programmatic scope or funding authority associated with these initiatives.

For example:

- **Maine** includes statutory language outlining county Extension structures and governance responsibilities. (7 M.R.S. §§ 191–197 (County Extension Act); 7 M.R.S. § 301 (Board of Agriculture).
- **Missouri** authorizes county Extension councils and establishes local governance roles in statute. (RSMo §§ 262.550–262.620.)
- **Wyoming** includes explicit statutory provisions supporting county-level Extension operations. (Wyo. Stat. §§ 21-17-301 to 21-17-308).

In these states, Extension’s authority is clearly identifiable in statute. This visibility can support legislative awareness, clarify state–county relationships, and make Extension easier to locate within state policy discussions. In some cases, detailed statutory definitions may provide clarity of mission, while in others, they may narrow flexibility depending on how the program scope is described.

2. Institutional Authorization Through Broader Enabling Statutes

In other states, Extension authority is embedded within broader statutes governing land-grant universities or higher education institutions. Extension may not be detailed separately but operates under the university’s general public service mission.

Examples include:

- **California**, where Extension functions under university authority without extensive stand-alone statutory language.
- **Maryland**, where Extension authority is embedded within broader institutional statutes.

Under this approach, Extension may be less visible as a distinct statutory entity. Its prominence in state policy conversations may depend more on its administrative and funding structure, as well as institutional leadership, than on legislative specificity or attention.

For SHEEOs, this framing may require closer examination of institutional policies to understand where Extension fits within the higher education system.

3. Cross-Referenced or Strategically Integrated Placement

A smaller number of states reference Extension beyond traditional agriculture or higher education chapters. These cross-references can connect Extension to workforce development, rural prosperity, or statewide advisory structures.

For example:

- **Colorado** references Extension within broader state policy contexts and has connected Extension to workforce and rural development conversations. (C.R.S. §§ [23-31-701 to 707](#); §§ [23-31-511](#), [512](#); § [30-24-103](#); § [23-31-122](#).)
- **Tennessee** includes statutory provisions that reinforce county-level financial support for Extension. (T.C.A. § [49-50-104](#); T.C.A. § [5-9-104](#).)
- **Washington** integrates Extension authority into county governance structures. ([RCW 36.50](#))

When Extension appears in multiple statutory domains, it can signal broader integration into state strategy. These cross-references can elevate Extension's role beyond its historical association with agriculture and position it as a cross-sector partner.

Why Statutory Framing Matters

Statutory language alone does not determine Extension's effectiveness. However, it shapes how Extension is positioned within states' higher education, workforce, and rural development systems. Explicit statutory language may increase visibility and clarify governance relationships.

- Embedded authority may offer flexibility while relying more heavily on institutional leadership.
- Cross-referenced statutory placement may signal integration into broader statewide goals.

For state higher education leaders, reviewing statutory language is a practical first step in assessing how Extension is positioned within the state's higher education architecture and how it might be aligned with workforce, rural, and community development priorities. To enable this review, an appendix to this report includes a review of how Extension is placed within statute in all 50 states^[5].

While statutory framing shapes authority and visibility, funding structures can have an even more direct impact on Extension's stability and local reach. The next section examines how state and county funding models influence Extension's capacity and policy alignment.



Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library.

State and Local Funding Structures for Extension



While the federal framework establishes a baseline funding partnership, state and local funding structures significantly influence Extension's stability, governance, and responsiveness. Across states, funding models vary in the degree to which counties are formally authorized to support Extension and in the predictability of local contributions.

It is also important to note that funding structures can differ across 1862 land-grant institutions, 1890 HBCUs, and 1994 Tribal land-grant institutions within the same state. What's more, the implementation of the funding structures also varies. Research has documented that state matching funds^[6] have historically been provided at different levels or with varying consistency across these institutional categories. Three broad funding patterns emerge from the 50-state scan.

[6] [Land-Grant But Unequal State One-To-One Match Funding for 1890 Land-Grant Universities](#)

1. Statutorily Authorized County Levies or Extension Districts

In several states, statutes authorize counties to levy taxes, establish extension districts, or appropriate funds specifically for Cooperative Extension. These provisions formalize local participation and can provide a more stable revenue stream.

Examples include:

- **Iowa** and **Kansas**, which authorize county levies to support Extension programming. (Iowa Code [ch. 176A](#), including §§ 176A.8, 176A.10 and K.S.A. [2-608 to 2-611](#) including 2-610 on county appropriations, budgets, and tax levies)
- **Maine**, where the statute outlines county-based Extension structures and financial responsibilities ([7 M.R.S. §§ 191–197](#))
- **Missouri**, where county Extension councils are authorized in statute and play a role in local governance and funding. ([RSMo §§ 262.550–262.620.](#))
- **Nebraska** and **North Dakota**, which include county levy authority in statute. (NDCC [Title 11, Chapter 38](#) and Neb. Rev. Stat. §§ [2-1601, 2-1602](#).)

Where local levies or district models exist, Extension often benefits from more predictable local funding and clearer governance roles. These structures can strengthen local ownership and reinforce Extension’s presence within communities.

2. County Appropriations Without Dedicated Levy Authority

In other states, counties are authorized to appropriate funds for Extension, but do not have a dedicated levy mechanism tied specifically to Extension. Funding may be discretionary and subject to annual budget decisions. For example:

- **Pennsylvania** permits county appropriations to support Extension programming. ([16 P.S. § 15336; General Appropriation Acts \(Penn State—Ag Research & Extension\)](#))
- **Tennessee** includes statutory provisions authorizing county financial support for Extension services.
- **Wyoming** authorizes counties to appropriate funds for Extension under state law. (Wyo. Stat. §§ [21-17-301 to 21-17-308](#).)

Under this approach, Extension maintains a local funding partnership, but revenue stability may vary based on local fiscal conditions and budget priorities.

3. Predominantly State and Federal Funding Models

In some states, Extension relies more heavily on state appropriations and federal formula funds, with less formalized county funding authority. Local support may still occur through facilities, in-kind contributions, or informal arrangements, but statutory funding mechanisms are less detailed.

In these states, funding stability depends more directly on state budget decisions and institutional allocations. This can simplify administrative structure but may reduce formalized local governance roles. Examples include:

- **California**, where Extension operates through the University of California system with local support often provided through partnerships and county agreements rather than formal levy authority.
- **Maryland**, where Extension is supported primarily through state appropriations and federal funding, with limited statutory detail regarding county funding mechanisms.
- **Massachusetts**, where Extension operates through institutional authority with local support typically provided through administrative arrangements rather than dedicated statutory funding structures.

Funding Structure and Governance Implications

Funding models are closely tied to governance. Where counties have statutory levy authority or formal councils, Extension may operate within a more decentralized governance structure. Local boards or councils may influence programming priorities and community engagement.

In states with more centralized funding models, Extension leadership may align more directly with university administration and state-level appropriations processes.

For state higher education leaders, understanding these funding structures is important for several reasons:

- Funding mechanisms affect Extension's financial predictability and its ability to design and implement programs in workforce and economic development.
- The presence of local funding will shape institutional accountability relationships beyond the state alone.

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- Funding mechanisms affect Extension's financial predictability and its ability to design and implement programs in workforce and economic development.
- The presence of local funding will shape institutional accountability relationships beyond the state alone.
- Local levy or district models may provide greater insulation from state budget fluctuations and may help states strategically target resources.
- State-dominant funding models may facilitate closer alignment with statewide higher education or workforce strategies.
- Coordinating funding decisions across institutions with multiple land-grant institutions, including HBCU and TCU institutions, may help ensure state resources are allocated adequately.

While funding structures influence stability and governance, accountability and reporting frameworks shape how Extension outcomes are measured and connected to state policy priorities. The next section examines how states approach reporting, oversight, and accountability for Cooperative Extension.

Comprehensive cross-state data comparing federal, state, and local Extension funding levels are not consistently available in a single public source. While institutions report aggregate funding to USDA, disaggregated state and county contributions are often reported differently across institutions and are not uniformly compiled in a publicly accessible format. As a result, this analysis focuses on statutory funding authority rather than comparative funding magnitudes. Future work could examine trends in fiscal data to complement the statutory analysis presented here.



Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library.

Accountability, Reporting, and Oversight

Cooperative Extension operates within a federal accountability structure. At the state level, however, reporting expectations and oversight mechanisms vary considerably. These differences influence how Extension outcomes are connected to state policy priorities and higher education governance conversations.

Three accountability patterns emerge across states.

1. Federal Reporting as the Primary Accountability Mechanism

All states participate in federal reporting processes tied to the Smith–Lever Act and related programs. States submit multi-year plans of work outlining program priorities and report annually on activities and outcomes. These reports provide a consistent national framework for documenting Extension’s impact in areas such as agriculture, youth development, community vitality, and workforce-related programming.

In many states, this federal reporting structure serves as the primary formal accountability mechanism. In many states, statute does not establish reporting requirements beyond those required for federal compliance, even though states have the authority to do so.

Under this model, Extension accountability is largely shaped by federal expectations and institutional oversight rather than by state-level statutory mandates.

Federal plans of work and annual reports are submitted through the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture reporting system. While USDA uses aggregate information for oversight and national summaries, there is no single, publicly accessible platform that synthesizes Extension outcomes across all states in a standardized, comparative format. As a result, visibility into cross-state performance and impact trends may be limited for policymakers.

2. States with Statutory Reporting or Oversight Provisions

A smaller number of states include explicit reporting requirements or oversight structures in statute. These provisions may require that Extension submit legislative committees or state agencies, provide budgetary updates or expenditure documentation, and/or participate in formal advisory or oversight bodies. For example:

- **Colorado** includes statutory references that connect Extension activity to broader state reporting contexts. ([C.R.S. §§ 23-31-701 to 707](#))
- **Iowa** includes statutory provisions tied to budgeting and financial transparency. (Iowa Code [ch. 176A](#) (including §§ 176A.8, 176A.10))
- **Maine** outlines governance structures that reinforce accountability relationships at the county level. ([7 M.R.S. §§ 191–197](#))

These statutory provisions can increase visibility of Extension outcomes within state policymaking environments and create clearer lines of communication between Extension leadership and state agencies.

3. Embedded Accountability Through Institutional Governance

In some states, Extension accountability is embedded primarily within university governance and budget processes rather than detailed in statute. Under this approach, oversight occurs through university administrative review, state higher education budget hearings, and board-level reporting structures.

For example:

- In **California**, Extension accountability is integrated into university oversight rather than specified in separate statutory language. ([University of California policies](#))
- **Mississippi** operates within institutional governance structures that shape reporting and accountability alongside federal requirements. (Miss. Code Ann. §§ [37-113-19](#); [37-113-22](#); [37-113-35](#).)

This approach may offer administrative flexibility but can make Extension outcomes less visible in state policy conversations unless they are proactively linked to statewide goals.

Accountability Gaps and Opportunities

The 50-state scan suggests that although federal reporting provides a consistent accountability framework nationwide, state-level oversight structures vary in formality and visibility. Some states' policies are structured solely to meet federal requirements. In contrast, others layer on additional requirements based on their own context. As a result, Extension's contributions to educational opportunities, workforce development, rural prosperity, and community well-being may not always be explicitly connected to state higher education metrics or strategic plans.

For SHEEOs, this raises practical questions:

- How are Extension outcomes incorporated into statewide higher education reporting frameworks?
- Are federal plans of work and annual reports reviewed as part of state strategic planning? Do they provide information relevant for state planning?
- Do existing reporting structures capture Extension's contributions to statewide attainment or workforce goals?

Greater alignment between federal reporting processes and state policy conversations may strengthen Extension's visibility within higher education systems and clarify its role in advancing statewide priorities.

While accountability structures influence how Extension outcomes are documented, statutory framing and funding models also affect how Extension is positioned within broader state strategies. The next section examines how some states integrate Extension into workforce, rural development, and higher education planning frameworks.

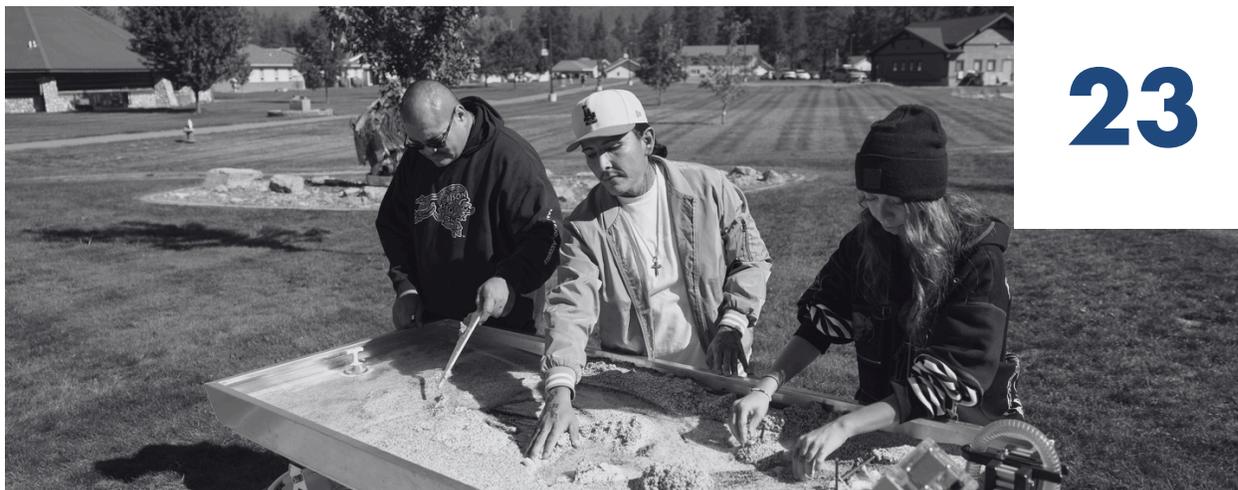


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Extension's Role in Broader State Strategy



Statutory framing, funding structures, and accountability mechanisms influence how Extension is positioned within state systems. In several states, Extension is integrated into broader policy frameworks that extend beyond its traditional agricultural roots. These placements signal opportunities for alignment with statewide economic, workforce, and community priorities. Three strategic positioning patterns are particularly relevant for state higher education leaders.

1. Extension as a Rural and Community Development Partner

In many states, Extension maintains deep, long-standing relationships in rural communities. In some cases, statutes or governance structures reinforce Extension's role in rural development or community vitality initiatives.

For example:

- **Colorado** has connected Extension activity to broader rural and workforce conversations within the state.
- **Maine** maintains formalized county-level governance structures that support sustained community engagement.
- **Washington** integrates Extension authority within county governance structures, reinforcing local ties.



In these contexts, Extension functions as a trusted intermediary between research institutions and local communities. Its place-based presence can complement state-level rural development strategies.

For SHEEOs, this positioning raises questions about how Extension's community relationships might strengthen higher education's engagement with rural regions, particularly in states pursuing attainment or workforce goals outside metropolitan areas.

2. Extension and Workforce Development Alignment

Although Extension is not always explicitly linked to workforce policy in statute, its programming frequently intersects with workforce-related goals, including agricultural innovation, small business support, youth development, and community economic resilience.

Some states have begun to connect Extension more directly to workforce and economic development policy frameworks. Where statutory cross-references or advisory structures exist, Extension may participate in broader workforce planning conversations.

For example:

- **Tennessee** authorizes county-level financial support structures that reinforce Extension's local workforce and community programming capacity. (T.C.A. § [49-50-104](#); T.C.A. § [5-9-104](#).)
- **Georgia** and **Wisconsin** reference Extension within broader state development contexts, reflecting integration beyond agricultural programming alone. (O.C.G.A. §§ [20-3-38](#); [2-6-7](#); [2-6-9](#).; Wis. Stat. §§ [36.25\(3\)](#), [59.56\(3\)](#).)

For state higher education leaders, understanding Extension's workforce-adjacent programming may reveal opportunities to better align noncredit education, adult learning initiatives, and community-based programming with statewide workforce strategies.

3. Extension Within Higher Education Strategy

In some states, Extension is positioned more visibly within higher education governance or statewide planning conversations. This positioning may occur through institutional reporting relationships, budget alignment with higher education coordinating boards, and inclusion in statewide strategic plans.

When Extension is integrated into higher education strategy, it can function as a bridge between research universities and communities, particularly in areas where trust in higher education institutions may vary.

For example:

- **Mississippi** operates within a governance structure that connects Extension to broader institutional oversight.
- **Missouri** maintains county governance structures that reinforce public accountability and community presence.

In these contexts, Extension's public service mission can complement statewide higher education goals related to adult learners, rural attainment, and community engagement.

Across states, variation in statutory framing, funding design, and accountability structures reflects different policy choices about how Cooperative Extension is positioned within public systems. While the federal framework provides a consistent foundation, state-level decisions shape Extension's visibility, governance relationships, and connection to broader priorities. In some states, Extension is integrated more explicitly into rural and workforce strategies; in others, its role remains primarily anchored in institutional and federal structures. These differences do not signal varying levels of commitment, but rather distinct approaches to structuring a longstanding public service function. For state higher education leaders, understanding these structural choices is a necessary first step in assessing how Extension contributes to statewide postsecondary education and workforce development goals.



Related Resource for State Higher Education Leaders

[Recognizing Extension Learning: Pathways to Credit and Career Advancement](#)

This companion resource explores how states and institutions can create pathways that connect Extension participation to credit, credentials, and career advancement for adult learners.



Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library.

Strategic Considerations for SHEEOs

Across states, Extension's integration into broader policy strategy varies. In some states, statute explicitly connects Extension to rural development, economic vitality, or workforce-related objectives. For example, Colorado statute references Extension in connection with "community development" and related public service functions (C.R.S. §§ 23-31-701 to 707). Georgia statute similarly situates Extension within the university's "public service and outreach" mission, reinforcing its alignment with statewide development initiatives (O.C.G.A. §§ 20-3-38; 2-6-7). In other states, statutory references to Extension remain more closely tied to traditional agricultural functions and federal accountability structures, with fewer explicit cross-references to broader workforce or economic policy frameworks.

Depending on a state's statutory and funding structure, SHEEOs may be positioned to engage Extension in different ways. For state higher education leaders, key considerations include:

- How is Extension represented in statewide higher education and workforce plans?
- Are Extension plans of work reviewed in alignment with statewide goals and strategy?
- Could Extension's trusted community presence support broader efforts to strengthen higher education's reach in rural or underserved regions?
- Do governance and funding structures enable Extension to participate fully in cross-agency planning conversations?
- How might those structures also facilitate cross-sector partnerships and collaboration within higher education?

These questions do not assume a single model is preferable. Rather, they highlight how statutory framing, funding design, and accountability mechanisms influence Extension's capacity to contribute to statewide strategy.



Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library.

Looking Ahead

As states continue to pursue workforce alignment, rural resilience, and postsecondary attainment goals, Cooperative Extension represents an established but variably positioned asset within state systems. While the federal framework provides consistency, state-level statutory and funding choices shape how visible and strategically connected Extension is within broader higher education and economic development conversations.

For some states, Extension already functions as a cross-sector partner in rural and workforce initiatives. In others, its contributions may be less formally connected to statewide planning processes, even when programming aligns with similar goals. Recognizing these structural differences allows state leaders to understand the range of policy options available better.

For SHEEOs, examining how Extension is authorized, funded, and positioned offers an opportunity to assess whether current structures support the state's long-term higher education and workforce objectives. As policy priorities evolve, greater intentional alignment between Extension's community-based work and statewide strategy may strengthen both institutional reach and public impact.



Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library.

Appendix - 50-State Statutory Framing Patterns

This brief draws on a review of statutory language across all 50 states. States were categorized based on how Cooperative Extension appears in statute, including:

- Distinct and direct statutory references.
- Institutional authorization through broader enabling statutes.
- Cross-referenced or integrated policy placement.

Explore the full Cooperative Extension statutory [50-state scan](#).

State	Role / Authority	Advisory Bodies	Reporting	Plan of Work (POW) Basis	State Funding	Local Funding
Alabama	Alabama Cooperative Extension System created and operated jointly by Auburn Univ. and Alabama A&M Univ.; objectives and duties outlined in statute (Ala. Code § 2-30-1; § 2-30-2).	Not specified in statute as statewide advisory council; system administered jointly by land-grants per operational policies	No explicit state annual report requirement located in statute for ACES; program objectives and operations governed by ACES policies.	Statute directs aiding in securing Smith-Lever funds for Extension work; operates under federal Smith-Lever requirements (Ala. Code § 2-30-2).	State appropriations paid upon request of Auburn Univ. or Alabama A&M Univ. for ACES operations (§ 2-30-4).	County commissions and municipalities may appropriate funds for Extension purposes (§ 2-30-23).
Alaska	State assents to Smith-Lever Act, University of Alaska designated to administer and carry on extension work (AS 14.40.430; AS 14.40.440).	None specified in statute.	Not specified in statute; subject to federal Smith-Lever/AREERA reporting via USDA/NIFA.	Acceptance of Smith-Lever funds requires federally approved plan of work (AS 14.40.430).	Extension administered by University of Alaska; state support via university appropriations; authority to administer Smith-Lever funds (AS 14.40.440).	No specific statewide local funding mandate identified in statute (borough/municipal support may occur via agreements).
Arizona	Smith-Lever accepted; UA Board of Regents authorized; statutes establish county ag extension boards and extension work framework (A.R.S. §§ 3-121 to 3-124).	County Agricultural Extension Boards in each county (§ 3-124).	Annual report required under plan of extension work (§ 3-125).	Statute requires a "plan of extension work" with details; approved and reported annually (§ 3-125).	Authority for expenditure/matching from university appropriation to match federal grant (§ 3-122).	Counties adopt annual extension budgets; county board of supervisors levies a county tax to fund county share; funds transmitted to LIA comptroller (§ 3-126).
Arkansas	The University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service is established as part of the Division of Agriculture at the University of Arkansas (Ark. Code § 6-64-716). The Division includes the extension service and is tasked with research and outreach related to agriculture, food, families, and communities.	No separate statewide advisory council identified; county agents and stakeholders collaborate through local partnerships.	No statute found requiring a statewide annual report to the Governor; reporting occurs through the University of Arkansas and federal Smith-Lever reporting.	Operates under the federal Smith-Lever Act for cooperative extension work.	State appropriations to the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture/Extension, Ark. Code § 6-64-716(b)(4) authorizes use of federal, state, and local funds for extension activities.	Counties contribute funds for county agents and local extension offices, Ark. Code § 6-64-716(b)(4) references use of county and municipal funds for extension work.



Appendix - State and Local Funding Structures

States were reviewed for statutory provisions related to funding authority for Cooperative Extension. This included examination of statutes authorizing:

- County levies or extension districts.
- County appropriations without dedicated levy authority.
- Predominantly state and federal funding models.

States may exhibit characteristics of more than one approach. The categories reflect dominant statutory patterns identified through the 50-state scan rather than mutually exclusive classifications.



Appendix - Methodology

This analysis is based on:

- Review of statutory language in all 50 states.
- Examination of publicly available Extension plans of work.
- Review of relevant state-level reporting and governance structures.
- Working group materials and interviews from participating states (Colorado, Maine, Missouri, Mississippi, Tennessee).

This brief focuses on statutory and policy structures and does not evaluate programmatic outcomes or performance.