

Public Issues Education: Increasing Competence, Enabling Communities

National Public Policy Education Committee, Public Issues Education Competencies Task Force:

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Providing education on public issues such as land use, water quality, food safety, health care, and economic development can be challenging for Extension professionals. The issues are often complex, cutting across a range of academic disciplines and personal values. And public decisions about these issues are made in increasingly contentious and politically divisive atmospheres. Moreover, while the traditional model of expert-based Extension programming suits public issues with clear problems and easily identifiable solutions, new tools and processes are required in situations where problems are unclear – either because of disagreement about the problems' causes and consequences or because the problems are so complex that uncertainty is their key feature.

Citizens often turn to Cooperative Extension for help to work through complex problems, develop or rebuild relationships, and create sustainable solutions. We in Extension need to enhance our capacity to respond. We must equip ourselves with the knowledge and skills necessary to help citizens make sound public choices amid uncertainty and conflict.

Public issues education is not new, but over the years we've changed our way of approaching this work. Today, we recognize that there is no single "correct" path to follow when engaging citizens in learning about and managing public issues. Deciding which path to take can be confusing, and so some Extension professionals choose to avoid public issues education altogether.

Public issues – pressing and emerging matters that involve multiple, often conflicting interests and have widespread consequences

This publication is intended to stimulate discussion that leads Extension professionals to strengthen their capacity to provide public issues education. As the country moves forward into a new century, it is time to highlight the role of the land-grant university system in nurturing and sustaining democracy through public issues education and to renew our commitment and capacity to do this important work.

Objectives and Principles of Public Issues Education

Public issues education prepares citizens to engage in complex public issues of widespread concern in ways that lead to better-informed decisions. The principle objectives are to:

- increase citizens' knowledge about issues;
- assist citizens in determining appropriate and effective strategies for public decision making;

- help citizens craft, evaluate and implement alternative solutions;
- and build skills and provide opportunities to enhance citizens' effective participation in public decision-making processes.

In situations where viewpoints become polarized and public issues tend to divide citizens into economic, social, and political groups, the land-grant university can engage the public in achieving collective agreement on how to move forward. Extension professionals involved in such situations need a set of guiding principles. Here are some of those principles:

- A democratic system of government places high priority on the right of individuals to have a voice in public policy decisions that affect them.
- Citizens can increase their capacity to make good decisions about public issues by learning about those issues and the processes by which public decisions are made.
- Scientific information cannot substitute for value choices. Nor can science identify the most appropriate set of values. However, scientific information can more fully inform the value choices that people make.
- Public policy researchers and educators do not possess the wisdom (by virtue of superior education or scientific knowledge) to decide what is best for the public.

Roles of the Extension Professional

Public issues education is an interdisciplinary activity in which all Extension professionals may be involved. The Extension professional must be able to work with special-interest groups but must also be independent of them; he or she must provide expertise equitably to all interests and not act on the behalf of one interest exclusively.

The Extension professional must deal with the complex interplay between science, technology, life experience, values, and beliefs. Public issues involve many people, often with conflicting interests and values. The Extension professional must create learning opportunities that respect all participants' values and that encourage people to learn from one another and to become sufficiently informed to make sound decisions. While it is never appropriate for an Extension professional to advocate a particular solution, it is appropriate to promote and apply educational processes that encourage collaborative learning, consensus building, and problem solving. The Extension professional can play a number of important roles in a public issues education program. The most important of these are as follows:

- A **networker** identifies and links people and resources to increase people's knowledge of public issues and their ability to participate in public decision making.
- A **convenor** recognizes a public issue, identifies key stakeholders, gains their support and cooperation in the educational process, and works with them to design and carry out a process to achieve a mutually satisfying outcome.

- A **program designer** identifies a public issue and key stakeholders, analyzes the situation and stakeholder needs, helps design and develop a long-range educational program, and establishes action steps to implement the program.
- A **diplomat** moves tactfully between stakeholders to encourage them to work together through an educational process.
- The **forecaster** analyzes emerging issues to help a group begin to address issues as early as possible.
- A **facilitator** guides a group through the details of a structured process, helps the group identify and achieve its goals, and intervenes as necessary to help the group reach agreement.
- The **trainer** uses formal instruction and other learning experiences to help citizens acquire the knowledge and skills needed to understand public issues and to work effectively with others to resolve them.
- An **information provider** gathers, shares, and interprets research-based knowledge and information.
- The **researcher** conducts objective scientific analysis and helps people understand how research results apply to public issues.
- The **technical expert** provides objective information and expertise to aid decision-making.

An Extension professional may play different roles at different times, depending on the issue and the stage of the education process. The Extension professional can take citizens through an educational process that includes:

- identifying an initial concern;
- clarifying issues, goals, and points of conflict;
- considering alternative outcomes and consequences;
- making choices that are wise, fair, effective, and efficient;
- and implementing and evaluating resulting decisions.

There may be times when the Extension professional should not take a public issues education approach. In situations where stakeholders are so polarized that they are unwilling to discuss the issues or are locked into a debate on principles, public issues education is not likely to succeed. This is also true when the Extension professional is perceived to have a stake in the outcome or holds a strong personal viewpoint that precludes a neutral, pluralistic approach.

Public Issues Education in Action

Extension professionals around the country engage their communities on numerous topics through public issues education. Approaches to this work have been creative and varied. Many educators report that their work has been successful: Citizens are able to learn collaboratively, make informed decisions, and find solutions that are mutually satisfying to all interests. They also report that the work is professionally rewarding -- that approaching public issues with a

well-planned and well-executed education program enables them to assist people in new ways and in new situations.

The following three examples illustrate how varied public issues education can be:

Residents of an Indiana township outside a major urban center were frustrated over the rapid development that was occurring in their community and the fact that they did not have a voice in the decision-making process. They contacted their Purdue Cooperative Extension office for help. Together, the county agent and a state community development specialist helped the citizens initiate a consensus-building process to create a vision for their community and a plan of action. Becoming engaged in local affairs in this way, citizens of the community became more knowledgeable about public issues that affect them, more informed about public decisions, and actively involved on local decision-making boards. Seven years later, the citizens continue to participate in community affairs and keep each other informed about public issues through a monthly newsletter and an electronic mail group.

When a group of investors proposed putting a 36,000-head swine operation in a coastal North Carolina county, many citizens were alarmed about its potential environmental and public health implications and made their concerns known to county decision makers. In response, the county Board of Commissioners issued a moratorium on all new and expanded intensive livestock operations in the county until they could devise a plan on how best to proceed. Recognizing the need for public discussion on the issues, the commissioners appointed a study committee represented by the agricultural community, public health officials, a regional environmental organization, and economic development interests. The goal was to identify problems and opportunities associated with intensive livestock operations and recommend a course of action. The commissioners turned to North Carolina Cooperative Extension to help the group develop its recommendations. Extension educators assisted the committee through a process to identify problems and develop solutions. An extensive collaborative learning process involved face-to-face dialogue between technical experts, decision makers, and key stakeholders. Committee members determined the sources of information, questions to be addressed, and depth of information needed. This process encouraged development of recommendations that were appropriate, creative and durable. The Board of Commissioners eventually adopted the committee's recommendations.

Decades of population growth, development pressure, and pollution from a variety of sources have degraded the ecosystems of the Pacific Northwest. To prevent the extinction of some salmon species, groups sued under the Endangered Species Act to curtail commercial forestry and urban development activities. The public debate over the right course of action quickly became polarized. Decision makers looked to Oregon State University Extension to help educate the public on this pressing natural resource issue. Instead of taking a traditional approach of developing a technical publication on salmon restoration, OSU organized a group of faculty members from a wide range of disciplines.

They set out to engage Oregonians in an informed discussion of this very complex issue. The result was the “Salmon Tabloid,” a widely distributed publication that framed the issue as a problem in which everyone was part of the solution. Reviews and feedback were universally positive. The public was able to get a broad, objective understanding of the issues and a research-based context from which to make policy choices.

While the educational approaches to each of these problem may appear at first glance to be unrelated, they all follow the same principles and employ many of the same processes. In each case, Extension professionals developed an effective public issues education program that helped citizens manage conflict collaboratively and make informed and constructive public choices. They succeeded because they possessed the competencies needed for effective public issues education programming. By gaining a better understanding of these competencies, Extension professionals can improve their ability to help communities work through complex issues.

Core Competencies of Public Issues Educators

Unlike most other Extension programming, public issues education focuses as much on *how* we teach as what we teach. The knowledge and skills required for an effective education program in a contentious situation are different from those needed to conduct more traditional extension programs. Interviews with Extension professionals who successfully work in public issues education reveal that these educators possess skills and abilities that enable them to deal with technical complexity, human diversity, and political sensitivity in a dynamic environment. They are effective communicators, networkers, and bridge-builders. They are technically competent as well as skilled in group processes.

The effective public issues educator possesses the following core competencies:

Creating Partnerships

- Ability to identify individuals and organizations involved in public issues and their potential roles in a public issues education program.
- Ability to bring individuals and organizations together to create a collaborative climate for problem solving.
- Ability to foster and maintain a fair and respectful group discussion to share information effectively.
- Ability to frame public issues to facilitate civil communication and collaborative, creative decision making.

Collecting and Interpreting Data about Issues, Audiences, and Educational Settings

- Ability to assess readiness for and suitability of public issues education approaches.
- Knowledge of formal and informal decision-making processes and their relationship to public issues education.

- Sufficient understanding of technical information about the issues to help participants identify sources of information and support.
- Understanding of the role of scientific analysis and information to the resolution of issues.
- Ability to recognize, understand, and value diverse perspectives held by program participants.

**Core Values
of the Public Issues Educator**

Successful public issues educators uphold a set of core values that guide them in their work. They believe that...

- *Education* is a powerful tool for improving the quality of public choices. Different ways of knowing about an issue, including personal stories, life experiences, and scientific research are to be valued. Experimentation, improvisation, inquiry, creativity, and continuous learning foster creative, critical thinking and lead to informed, competent decisions.
- *Inclusion* ensures that all people with a stake in decisions that affect their lives can contribute to and influence the decision-making process. It balances power and ensures they have equal access to relevant information and the opportunity to participate.
- *Civil dialogue* among people with diverse backgrounds and viewpoints can enhance the quality of public decisions. When mutual trust and respect are cultivated, such dialogue can occur.
- *Innovative solutions* often rest on a willingness to negotiate, share power, and explore collaborative action.
- *Improving communication and decision-making skills* through education enables every person to become involved in public discourse. This may allow for creative, collaborative solutions that previously were not possible.

- Ability to identify conditions that foster controversy.
- Ability to identify and prioritize essential issues and interests.

- Ability to understand and communicate about complex issues.

- Ability to involve individuals and organizations whose participation in the educational process are critical to the program's success.

- Ability to identify conditions that affect participation in a public issues education program.

- Ability to discern whether the degree of polarization among participants may detract from a successful public issues education program.

- Ability to recognize and interpret relationships among participants, including sources of power, power imbalances, and political dynamics.

Designing Public Issues Education Programs

- Ability to choose and apply educational methods that are appropriate for program goals, issues and audiences.

- Ability to adapt a public issues education program to existing situations and circumstances.

- Ability to identify and define appropriate roles for educators and participants.

- Ability to define and communicate a sequence of steps leading participants to their desired outcome.

- Ability to establish realistic and attainable meeting objectives.
- Ability to prepare meeting information, including agendas, background materials and speakers.
- Ability to work with participants to create and follow behavioral and procedural guidelines.

Communicating Effectively

- Ability to listen actively and ask questions effectively.
- Ability to provide constructive feedback.
- Ability to monitor one's own communication behaviors and those of others.
- Ability to encourage and maintain constructive dialogue among participants.

Facilitating Group Discussion and Decision-Making

- Knowledge of group decision-making dynamics.
- Knowledge of negotiation processes, strategies, and tactics.
- Ability to keep participants on task and engaged.
- Ability to help participants move from advocacy toward inquiry within a group setting.
- Ability to explain and facilitate the processes of collaborative learning, planning, and problem solving.
- Ability to help participants to clearly define their roles in all phases of the process.
- Ability to promote civil discourse through open and balanced discussions.
- Ability to protect people and their ideas from attack.
- Ability to manage multiple lines of thought and discussion.
- Ability to organize information for efficient and effective use.

Managing and Transforming Conflict

- Ability to recognize sources of conflict.
- Ability to intervene into the conflict in a constructive and instructive manner.
- Ability to help participants establish ground rules of effective communication.
- Ability to facilitate communication and information exchange in an emotionally charged climate.
- Ability to build and maintain trust among the participants by establishing a positive climate.
- Ability to minimize or neutralize the effects of negative emotions and behaviors.

Working with Scientific and Technical Information

- Ability to work with multiple participants to identify data needs and sources.
- Ability to recognize both the importance and limitations of scientific data and analysis in the resolution of public issues.
- Ability to organize complex information in ways that make it useful to all participants.
- Ability to manage different types of information in various educational settings.
- Ability to organize and facilitate the presentation, interpretation, and application of information by outside experts.
- Ability to organize the search for and analysis of data.
- Ability to prepare technical reports.

Creating an Environment of Professionalism

- Ability to demonstrate a commitment to honesty, integrity, and respect for all participants.
- Ability to separate one's personal values from issues under consideration.
- Ability to demonstrate sensitivity to participants' values and diversity, including gender, ethnic, and cultural differences.

Administrative Support for Public Issues Education

It is essential that administrators support Extension professionals' involvement in public issues education efforts. Administrators should endorse public issues education programs that are based on unbiased scientific information and that facilitate collaborative learning and problem solving among diverse interests and values. Extension programs in several states have taken a lead by adopting policy statements that articulate Extension administration's support for work in this area. Other state programs would greatly benefit by following these examples.

It is important that Extension administrators recognize that public issues education may place Extension professionals in the midst of controversial issues. While no public issues education program is totally risk-free, Extension administration can increase program effectiveness by strengthening Extension professionals' core competencies. Administration can:

- encourage Extension professionals to learn about public issues education and the related core competencies;
- encourage Extension professionals to develop these competencies through practice in controlled supportive settings;

- encourage Extension professionals to facilitate and stimulate unbiased scholarly research related to public issues;
- encourage professional development to strengthen competencies through sabbaticals and other study opportunities.
- encourage Extension professionals to develop materials to facilitate and support public issues education;
- foster linkages and share information about public issues education with citizens, government agencies, and other educational institutions;
- assist and support Extension professionals in formally measuring the impacts of public issues education programs and using results to target program improvements;
- and recognize and reward Extension professionals who conduct balanced, well-planned and well-executed public issues education programs.