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Development of a "Canons of Practice" Policy at Washington State University

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Development of a "Canons of Practice" Policy at Washington State University

Abstract

Public policy educators, researchers, and administrators at Washington State University developed the *Canons of Practice* to guide faculty and staff engaging in contentious public issues. The need for such a document became evident when existing university policies and procedures lacked a suitable mechanism for resolving external criticism of public policy education and research. The *Canons of Practice* sets parameters for involvement in public policy research and education, provides guidelines for faculty and staff conduct, defines expectations of citizens and stakeholders, and establishes "due process" as the core of administrative response.

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Introduction

In 1993, Boyle and Mulcahy said accepting the challenge of public policy education can strengthen political support for Cooperative Extension as the most relevant educational institution in contemporary society. Yet 6 years later, only nine states had implemented a formal policy for conduct of public issues education programs (Favero & Haaland, 1999). Given the lack of such a policy, Extension faculty involved in public policy education risk having their work questioned. Washington State University has experienced several cases in recent years in which

communications from stakeholders to administrators questioned the integrity of individuals.

For example, several faculty had convened collaborative problem-solving processes bringing together competing interest groups and affected stakeholders to foster dialogue and facilitate agreements. Other faculty had conducted studies (commissioned by legislators and state agencies) that evaluated the costs and benefits of alternative resource policies. In these and other policy cases, stakeholder groups dissatisfied with the problem-solving process or research results then complained to university administration. In several instances, they threatened to withhold promised financial gifts and in some cases demanded that involved faculty be relieved of further responsibilities.

Compounding the problem, no administrative policies or procedures addressed external criticism of faculty activities in public policy education. (Policies and procedures in existing documents such as the faculty manual dealt only with issues of financial and personal behavior.) Thus, administrators sometimes failed to consult with faculty before crafting and conveying their response to stakeholder groups. This perceived lack of due process had a negative impact on faculty morale. Many faculty were unsure of administrative support for either public policy education or applied research on potentially controversial issues. Lacking a common set of guidelines for engaging in public policy education and research, faculty and administrators were uncertain how to proceed.

In response, a faculty committee developed engagement guidelines for Extension and research faculty involvement in public policy education and research within the College of Agriculture and Home Economics. They also addressed the related responsibilities of administrators and the public.

Developing the Canons

Committee members extensively reviewed best practices, principles, and guidelines available both within the land-grant system (ECOP's policy statement on public issues education, 1991; Stevens & Vance's edited guide for public issues education, 1995) and from professional organizations involved in public policy research and education (Bourne & Carlson's publication prepared for the *Society of Professionals in Dispute Resolution*, 1996), and then prepared a draft policy statement.

The draft document underwent internal review and multiple revisions, including legal revision acceptable to university counsel. After the full college, faculty and staff had the opportunity to review the proposed policy and offer comments, the college administration approved the document. The college administration officially adopted the *Canons of Practice* on April 11, 2002.

Importance of the Canons of Practice

Land-grant researchers and educators are duty bound to conduct themselves professionally at all times. The College of Agriculture and Home Economics is now using the *Canons of Practice* whenever faculty members engage in public policy research and education. The *Canons of Practice* identify the parameters within which policy research and education is appropriate, specify professional conduct during such work, and quantify expectations of the public's behavior while engaged in public policy research and education processes. Still, public policy research, education, and dispute resolution are areas wherein competing interests and values often collide. Complaints from members of the public are inevitable. Such complaints most often go to college administrators before reaching the involved faculty, professional staff, or graduate student employee.

"Due process" is at the core of administrative response. The *Canons of Practice* details a sequence of activities for administrators to follow, including:

1. Administrators will inform employees immediately about concerns or complaints and consult them about resolution.
2. Employees will be provided with all relevant information in a timely fashion according to written procedures and will be granted an immediate opportunity to respond to the complaint.
3. Where complaints or concerns are substantive and not resolved immediately, administrators will provide written notification of the complaint and keep the affected employees informed during all stages of the process.
4. Administrators will act to assure that responses to complaints are not, and do not appear to be, biased towards particular constituents based on their political position, financial connection to the university, or other invidious bias.

Implications for Extension Colleagues

The fact that only nine institutions had implemented policies for conduct of public issues education programs by 1999 (Favero & Haaland, 1999) is cause for concern. What safety nets are in place for educators and researchers whose states lack policies? What needed policy and public issues education or research is not getting done because faculty and staff have no clear guidelines or

support for such engagement?

The *Canons of Practice* guidelines provide a model for review and a possible template for adaptation and adoption by other land-grant institutions.

Land-grant institutions have a rich history of working with the public and their representatives in addressing controversial issues. The anticipated improvement in communication and understanding between college employees and members of the public should engender closer collaboration, more effective working relationships, and stronger partnerships.

The *Canons* are online at <http://www.cahe.wsu.edu/cop/>.

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