

12-1-2004

## Survey of Extension Professionals' Skill Levels Needed to Practice Public Issues Education

Loretta Singletary

*University of Nevada, Reno*, [singletaryl@unr.edu](mailto:singletaryl@unr.edu)

Marilyn Smith

*University of Nevada, Reno*, [smithm@unce.unr.edu](mailto:smithm@unce.unr.edu)

George Hill

*University of Nevada, Reno*, [gchill@unr.edu](mailto:gchill@unr.edu)

Patrick Corcoran

*Oregon State University Extension*, [patrick.corcoran@orst.edu](mailto:patrick.corcoran@orst.edu)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

---

### Recommended Citation

Singletary, L., Smith, M., Hill, G., & Corcoran, P. (2004). Survey of Extension Professionals' Skill Levels Needed to Practice Public Issues Education. *The Journal of Extension*, 42(6), Article 13.

<https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol42/iss6/13>

This Research in Brief is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Extension by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact [kokeefe@clemson.edu](mailto:kokeefe@clemson.edu).



## Survey of Extension Professionals' Skill Levels Needed to Practice Public Issues Education

### Abstract

The study discussed here examines Extension professionals' perceived skills to practice Public Issues Education. Extension professionals who responded rated their skills moderately, regardless of years of experience. This is true for all experience levels, with each level of experience having certain skill strengths that might benefit others. Those designing Public Issues Education trainings and curriculum for Extension professionals should not presume that tenure or experience in Extension guarantees high skill levels to effectively practice Public issues Education. Further assessments are needed to determine more precisely what skills and what skill levels are to be included in future trainings.

### Loretta Singletary

Extension Educator  
University of Nevada Cooperative Extension  
University of Nevada, Reno  
Yerington, Nevada  
[singletaryl@unce.unr.edu](mailto:singletaryl@unce.unr.edu)

### Marilyn Smith

Area Specialist  
University of Nevada Cooperative Extension  
University of Nevada, Reno  
Elko, Nevada  
[smithm@unce.unr.edu](mailto:smithm@unce.unr.edu)

### George Hill

Associate Professor  
University of Nevada, Reno  
Reno, Nevada  
[gchill@unr.edu](mailto:gchill@unr.edu)

### Patrick Corcoran

Community Development Specialist  
Clatsop County Extension Service  
Astoria, Oregon  
[Patrick.Corcoran@orst.edu](mailto:Patrick.Corcoran@orst.edu)

## Introduction

Public Issues Education provides Extension professionals with a structured approach to educate and assist citizens in addressing complex and controversial issues. Past issues of the *Journal of Extension* have addressed Extension's challenges, opportunities, and emerging roles in the Public Issues Education arena (Corp & Darnell, 2002; Patton & Blaine, 2001; Longo & Dresbach, 2001; Frederick, 1998; Schumacher & Lloyd, 1997; Cooley, 1994; Bolen, 1993; Boyle & Mulcahy, 1993; Carpenter, 1993; Goodwin, 1993). A gap in the literature, however, concerns specific skills Extension professionals need to practice Public Issues Education effectively.

This article reports the results of a survey of 120 Extension professionals ranging in experience from 1 to 30 plus years. The survey examines Extension professionals' perceived skills to practice Public Issues Education and suggests future training and curriculum needs.

The Extension professional can play a variety of roles in a Public Issues Education program, including facilitator, teacher, and researcher. In Public Issues Education programs, the Extension professional does not advocate any particular solution but instead provides a neutral, supportive atmosphere for collaborative problem solving (Public Issues Education Task Force, 2002). Thus, the traditional "expert-based" Extension program model of scientific information delivery must be adapted to fit an issues-based approach to programming, such as the Public Issues Education approach allows (CSREES, 2002; Bolen, 1993).

This suggests that in addition to subject matter knowledge, Extension professionals must possess certain skills to conduct effective Public Issues Education programs. Such skills include those useful in traditional Extension program settings, such as organizing educational events, providing materials, and involving technical experts from the university (Peters, 2002; Boyle & Mulcahy, 1993). A comprehensive set of skills, however, extends beyond those needed to conduct traditional programs to include group facilitation, interpersonal communication, and similar types of "collaborative process" skills.

## Methods and Procedures

For the purpose of the study, a questionnaire was designed to measure Extension professionals' perceived skills to conduct Public Issues Education programs. Questions about skills are adapted from a set of "core competencies" developed by the National Public Policy Education Subcommittee on Public Issues Education (Task Force). The Task Force is comprised of Extension professionals from across the nation actively practicing Public Issues Education and conducting applied research around these programs. Since 1999, they have worked together to identify skills that enable Extension professionals to conduct effective Public Issues Education programs.

Core competencies include the following broad categories:

- Collect and interpret information about issues, audiences, and educational settings;
- Design Public Issues Education programs;
- Communicate effectively;
- Facilitate group discussions and decision-making;
- Manage and transform conflict;
- Work with scientific and technical information; and
- Create an environment of professionalism (Public Issues Education Task Force, 2002).

A complete description and explanation of these core competencies are available through the Public Issues Education Web site <<http://www.publicissueseducation.net>>.

Members of the Task Force adapted from these core competencies a list of specific skills for this study. Members of the Task Force in Nevada, Oregon, and Washington reviewed earlier drafts of the questionnaire and approved the final draft. Finally, a panel of three university-based faculty members in Nevada familiar with Public Issues Education reviewed the final questionnaire. The purpose of the reviews was to identify missing skills and to check for reading comprehension of survey questions. The authors revised the questionnaire based upon reviewers' recommendations.

The resulting questionnaire featured 18 items about skills needed to conduct effective Public Issues Education programs. Using a Likert scale of 1 (not very skilled) to 5 (very skilled), Extension professionals rated their skills. In addition, participants indicated years of professional experience.

The survey sample consisted of approximately 120 members of the National Association of Agricultural County Agents who voluntarily participated in a Public Issues Education workshop. Workshop participants were selected as the survey sample because, through their attendance, they indicated an interest in further training in Public Issues Education. These workshop participants are in ideal positions to educate and directly assist communities with public issues. They also have the opportunity to consider what skills are necessary based on their field experiences. That is, presumably either formally or informally, they have tried various educational approaches and learned from both their successes and failures.

Selected facilitators distributed the questionnaire prior to the workshop and asked participants to return the completed questionnaire to them before leaving. The printed questionnaire included instructions and an exemption statement. A statement of exemption printed on the questionnaire explained that voluntary completion of the questionnaire indicated their consent to participate in the study.

## Results

Completed questionnaires served as the data source for the study. Cronbach's coefficient alpha was used to estimate internal consistency of the 18 Likert-type scale items. The Cronbach score was high ( $r = .93$ ) and indicates that there was high internal consistency between the variables (Carmines & Zeller, 1979).

### About the Participants

Of the 120 survey participants, 110 answered the question regarding years of experience and are

included in this analysis. Of these 110 participants, 20% (n = 22 ) had between 1 to 10 years, while 19% (n = 21) had 11 to 19 years, 22% (n = 24) had 20 to 29 years, and the largest group, 39% (n = 43), had 30 plus years of experience.

### Relationship Between Skill Levels and Professional Experience

A statistical test (Spearman's rho) was conducted to test for relationships between perceived skill levels and professional experience. The results are significant and indicate that the Extension professionals who participated in this survey rated their skills similarly, regardless of their years of professional experience (Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
Relationship Between Perceived Skill Levels and Years in Extension

		<b>1-10 Years</b>	<b>11-19 Years</b>	<b>20-29 Years</b>	<b>30+ Years</b>
1-10 years	Correlation Coefficient	--	.627**	.735**	.681**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	--	.007	.001	.003
	N	22	21	24	43
11-19 years	Correlation Coefficient	--	--	.597*	.592*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	--	--	.011	.012
20-29 years	Correlation Coefficient	--	--	--	.670**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	--	--	--	.003
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).					
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).					

Additional analysis was conducted to determine if any particular skills differ with regards to experience. For the purpose of this analysis, mean scores were simplified by collapsing the five skill ratings into low, moderate, and high skill levels (Table 2). That is, (1) low skill levels represents those who selected 1 and 2; (2) moderate skill levels represents those who selected 3; and (3) high skill levels represents those who selected 4 and 5 on the Likert scale. Overall, Extension professionals rated their skills as moderate (2).

The results indicate that one item at which Extension professionals agree they are skilled, regardless of experience, is "organize educational events and materials." Other comparatively strong skills, regardless of experience, are "provides critical information in a timely manner," "involve technical expertise from within the university," and "recognize the importance and limitations of scientific data."

**Table 2.**  
Rank Order Comparison of Skill Levels by Years of Professional Experience

	<b>1-10 Years</b>	<b>11-19 Years</b>	<b>20-29 Years</b>	<b>30+ Years</b>
Organize educational events and materials.	2.82(1)	2.84(1)	2.87(1)	2.93(1)
Listen actively, respectfully to opposing views.	2.77(2)	[2.27(14)]	2.58(5)	2.7(4)
Provide critical information in a timely manner.	2.55(3)	2.82(2)	2.83(2)	2.74 (3)
Demonstrate sensitivity to stakeholder diversity including gender, ethnic and	2.52(4)	2.53(7)	2.67(3)	[2.45(9)]

cultural differences.				
Involve technical expertise from within the university.	2.45(5)	2.75(3)	2.67(3)	2.85(2)
Recognize importance and limitations of scientific data.	2.45(6)	2.58(4)	2.5(7)	2.59(5)
Involve technical expertise from outside the university.	2.33(7)	2.55(6)	[2.33(12)]	2.54(6)
Separate your personal values from your professional role in conflict.	2.33(8)	2.57(5)	2.52(6)	[2.29(17)]
Work with stakeholders to create and follow a set of ground rules for working together.	[2.22(9)]	2.26(16)	2.30(14)	2.35(14)
Help stakeholders clarify the issues.	2.15(10)	2.42(11)	2.37(11)	2.38(12)
Work with stakeholders to identify data needs.	2.15(11)	2.52(8)	2.38(8)	2.52(7)
Knowledge of collaborative decision-making process.	2.14(12)	2.44(9)	2.33(12)	2.48(8)
Monitor your own communication behavior.	2.09(13)	2.44(9)	[2.13(18)]	2.38(12)
Help stakeholders work through a sequence of steps to reach a desired outcome.	[2.00(14)]	2.16(18)	2.17(17)	2.25(18)
Facilitation skills including: keeping participants engaged and on task and protecting people and their ideas from attack.	1.95(15)	2.35(13)	[2.38(8)]	2.39(11)
Acknowledge political relationships among stakeholders.	1.85(16)	2.21(17)	[2.38(8)]	2.43(10)
Help participants move from advocating their solution to learning about a number of possible solutions.	1.79(17)	2.36(12)	2.25(16)	2.31(15)
Bring in speakers with nontraditional views about conflict.	1.78(18)	2.26(15)	2.30(14)	2.30(16)
Code: 1 = low skill levels; 2 = moderate skill levels; 3 = high skill levels				

Extension professionals rated only a few skills differently based upon professional experience, however. The least experienced group, 1 to 10 years, rated their facilitation skills comparatively higher than more experienced groups. These include, for example, "working with stakeholders to create and follow a set of ground rules" and "helping stakeholders work through a sequence of steps to reach a desired outcome."

In contrast, a more experienced group, 11 to 19 years, rated themselves comparatively lower at

"listening actively, respectfully to opposing views." Similarly, professionals with 20 to 29 years experience rated themselves comparatively lower at "involving expertise from outside the university" and "monitoring your own communication behavior." Finally, the most experienced professionals, 30 plus years, rated their skills comparatively lower at "demonstrating sensitivity to stakeholder diversity, including gender, ethnic, and cultural differences" and "separating your personal values from your professional role in the conflict."

## Conclusions

Helping communities manage public conflict is increasingly becoming a focus area for Extension professionals nationwide. The recent survey of Extension professionals indicates that they believe they are moderately skilled to conduct Public Issues Education programs. For the most part, the professionals surveyed rated their skills similarly regardless of experience.

Generally, the results suggest that in designing Public Issues Education trainings and curricula for Extension professionals, all Extension professionals should be approached and treated the same, regardless of experience.

The study discovered a few exceptions, however. The results indicate that individuals with less experience rate some facilitation skills stronger than more experienced professionals do. In contrast, experienced professionals appear to be more politically perceptive and can comfortably work with stakeholders who network through local politics. Experienced professionals, however, may benefit from focused training in facilitation skills. And they can mentor less experienced professionals to help them refine their skills in working with local politics. Instructors can call upon these various strengths for individual leadership, learning and mentoring opportunities.

Those designing Public Issues Education trainings and curricula for Extension professionals should not presume that tenure or experience in Extension guarantees high skill levels to effectively practice Public issues Education. Further assessments are needed to determine more precisely what skills and what skill levels are to be included in future trainings.

## References

- Bolen, K. R. (1993). Accepting the challenge. *Journal of Extension* [On-line] 31(4). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1993winter/tp2.html>
- Boyle, P. G., & Mulcahy, S. H. (1993). Public policy education: A path to political support. *Journal of Extension* [On-line] 31(4). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1993winter/tp1.html>
- Carmines, E. G., & Zeller, R. A. (1979). *Reliability and validity assessment*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Carpenter, Z. L. (1993). Expanding the Extension horizon. *Journal of Extension* [On-line] 31(4). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1993winter/tp3.html>
- Cooley, F. E. (1994). Facilitating conflict-laden issues: An important Extension faculty role. *Journal of Extension* [On-line] 32(1). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1994june/a10.html>
- Corp, M. K., & Darnell, T. (2002). Conflict-laden issues: A learning opportunity. *Journal of Extension* [On-line] 40(1). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2002february/rb1.html>
- CSREES. (2002). Exploring new opportunities for Extension. Washington, DC: Extension Service, USDA [On-line]. Available at: [http://www.csrees.usda.gov/newsroom/white\\_papers/exploring.doc](http://www.csrees.usda.gov/newsroom/white_papers/exploring.doc)
- Frederick, A. L. (1998). Extension education opportunities with policymakers. *Journal of Extension* [On-line] 36(2). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1998april/comm1.html>
- Goodwin, J. (1993). Contrasting viewpoints about controversial issues. *Journal of Extension* [On-line] 31(3). Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1993fall/a7.html>
- Longo, M. F., & Dresbach, S. H. (2001). Ideas to assist Extension field professionals in building linkages and alliances. *Journal of Extension* [On-line] 39(2) Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2001april/iw1.html>
- Patton, D. B., & Blaine, T. W. (2001). Public issues education: Exploring Extension's role. *Journal of Extension* [On-line] 39(4) Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2001august/a2.html>
- Peters, S. J. (2002). Rousing the people on the land: The roots of the educational organizing tradition in Extension work. *Journal of Extension* [On-line] 40(3) Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2002june/a1.html>
- Public Issues Education Task Force. (2002). Public issues education: Increasing competencies, enabling communities. Reno, NV: USDA Innovations Fund, Farm Foundation & Regional Rural Development Centers. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.publicissueseducation.net>
- Schumacher, S. D., & Lloyd, M. (1997). Educating with controversial issues. *Journal of Extension*

*Copyright* © by *Extension Journal, Inc.* ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the *Journal Editorial Office*, [joe-ed@joe.org](mailto:joe-ed@joe.org).

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#)