

2-1-2002

Extension Faculty and Political Acumen

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Recommended Citation

Stoltz, M. (2002). Extension Faculty and Political Acumen. *The Journal of Extension*, 40(1), Article 2.
<https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol40/iss1/2>

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February 2002 // Volume 40 // Number 1 // Commentary // 1COM1



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Extension Faculty and Political Acumen

Abstract

Extension faculty function in a political arena and should be politically active in Extension issues and budgets. Extension faculty and administrators each have a role in providing reliable information on issues and budgets to elected officials. Extension administration should provide plans and budgets to faculty and expect them to work with elected officials as well as inform clientele and support groups. Communication between all levels of Extension becomes extremely critical. There are pitfalls, but the rewards can be a stable or higher Extension budget.

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As with most public employees, Oregon State University Extension faculty are not permitted to engage in political activity as part of their official duties. Even so, they are involved in marketing Extension programs, supporting budget requests, and asking Extension clientele and supporters to lobby for resources.

How can Extension faculty meet the need for public understanding of Extension programs and the need to build public and decision-maker support without becoming "lobbyists"? How can they be politically active without creating problems for themselves and their organization?

With 34 years in Extension, including 30 in county offices, I've learned that there are several ways for Extension faculty to be involved with decision makers/elected officials. I have found that Extension field faculty can be a powerful political tool—if Extension administration will support and use them effectively. However, there are also inappropriate responses and conversations that can cause substantial political harm.

Insights

Across the United States, Extension faculty have appropriately provided factual information to clientele about the importance and impact of programs and asked these clientele to contact legislators for political support of funding. If Extension field faculty have the appropriate information and are comfortable approaching legislators or members of Congress directly about Extension support and budgets, even more support can be gained.

Extension administration and field faculty need to understand that effective faculty—highly respected for the job they do—can spearhead change, promote understanding of complex and/or controversial issues, and build political support for Extension. Some of this, especially political support, includes developing personal relationships with elected officials as well as the more common method of working through Extension clientele.

The most powerful tools for building political support for Extension are strong programs in the field; funding follows good programming. In order to be effective in the political field, Extension faculty usually must be in their location several years and have developed outstanding programs. Their reputations will precede them as they foster working relationships with elected officials. To take advantage of these relationships, Extension faculty have to know and understand the federal, state, and local budgets and programs. If Extension administration provides them with reliable information in a timely manner, they can share that information with constituents and legislators. The dividends come in the form of increased statewide budgets.

Three Examples of Problems and Opportunities

Discussing Internal Conflicts in Public or with Clientele

There are times when Extension faculty have made major political mistakes by discussing internal conflicts or decisions with clientele and decision makers. Not only can this destroy the Extension worker's and the organization's credibility, but it also can have long-ranging consequences. These could be internal conflicts in the local Extension office or they could be national issues.

Consider the situation that arose in Congress with the 1990 Federal Extension budget. A number of powerful agricultural organizations were voicing concerns to USDA and individual members of Congress that Extension was shifting money from its agricultural and 4-H roots and, instead, was instituting social programs targeting disadvantaged audiences, the poor, the homeless, children at risk, etc.

Federal Extension personnel learned that local farm organizations were getting their information from local Extension workers. In turn, members of the organizations shared this information with their national officers, who took it directly to their congressional representative and to the congressional hearings on Extension's budget. Maintaining base funding in the Federal Extension budget became more difficult because of this input.

Two things caused this problem. First, local Extension faculty did not have all the information they needed to be so closely engaged in the situation. Although agriculture and youth funding remained constant and there had been additional funding from grants and the Federal initiative process for specifically targeted programs, Extension faculty did not know or did not report it. Second, the faculty voiced their frustration about this perceived switch in funding priorities to clientele. By sharing misinformation with clientele, the Extension faculty nearly destroyed their support base and severely damaged their credibility.

Extension administration from the federal level to the state level must work at providing faculty with reliable budget and policy information, and faculty must understand how important it is to be accurate in conversations with elected officials and clientele.

Responsive and Open Approach to Controversy

In another example, at the county and state level, a controversy with potentially negative political outcomes developed, but decisive action by local and state Extension faculty turned the situation around.

In the early 1980's, the area around Eugene, Oregon found itself with the largest Gypsy Moth infestation found west of the Mississippi. Aerial application of insecticides could expose more than 100,000 people in the metropolitan and surrounding area. In an area known for its environmental awareness, the Eugene metropolitan area population expressed concern about potential pesticide use. The Oregon Department of Agriculture asked the local OSU Extension forestry faculty member to develop a task force. The faculty member insisted that the environmental community be represented on the task force.

Two state Extension faculty in the OSU Department of Agricultural Chemistry offered to conduct a toxicological assessment of the proposed insecticides if requested by the task force. The Extension county staff chair made sure the testing was requested. Two of the four possible insecticides proposed to the task force were rejected based on the assessed risk.

Simultaneously, a local Eugene group charged that the local Extension faculty were biased in their presentations, advocating only an insecticide approach to the problem. They sent protest letters to the co-chairs of the Oregon Legislature Ways and Means Committee, which oversees Extension's budget, and to the chair of the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, asking for a hearing to enumerate their grievances.

The county office staff chair wrote the same legislators and copied the groups involved and also the local county commissioners, the Eugene City Council, local state legislators, and other influential people. The letter outlined Extension's role—including the rejection of two proposed insecticides—and its involvement in the decision to use a new *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) compound that was acceptable to many in the environmental community.

The staff chair offered to participate in any legislative meetings to discuss Extension's role in the project and any inappropriate behavior. In return, Extension received a letter of thanks from the chair of the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee for the information, and there were no additional complaints about Extension's role.

Why was this successful? I believe it is because the Extension faculty involved were willing to discuss what had been done correctly, and, if mistakes were made, what was done incorrectly. OSU State Extension faculty took the initiative to develop needed information on a controversial issue, and they and the local faculty provided facts that people could understand and use. Extension field faculty responded directly to legislators and other elected officials with balanced and factual information when another group charged bias.

Even though many said the gypsy moth infestation was too large to control, the infestation was

eliminated after 4 years by using several integrated control methods, including trapping, inspections, mating disruptions, and Bt.

Extension Field Faculty's Key Role in State Budget

My third example is at the state level. In Oregon, work on Extension's state budget starts 1 year ahead of a legislative session with the Oregon Legislature, meeting every 2 years. Contact with local legislators on issues and budgets by key Extension clientele around the state has worked very well. In addition, several state Extension faculty have worked with specific commodity groups who have championed the budget. Local Extension faculty have worked with local supporters and directly with legislators to complete the grass-roots support for increases in the Extension and research budgets.

Based on a legislative investment initiative developed in February and March of 1998 (almost a year before the legislature convened January, 1999), the 1999 legislative session saw a key Oregon senator introduce a bill to increase the budgets of Extension and research by more than 20%. After intense legislative maneuvering, the final budget included an 11% increase for Extension. In the 2001 legislative session, the previous increase was to be cut. The same approach reinstated the full budget.

It is important for Extension administration to work with faculty to develop realistic and reliable budget figures and plans well in advance of a legislative session. Oregon Extension distributes updated budget figures and success stories to all field faculty months ahead of the session. When asking for increased resources, everyone must know where the positions will be located and exactly what they will do. It is important for faculty with solid performance records to interact with legislators in their districts, informing them of Extension's impacts. In addition, administration should encourage key state Extension faculty to work with various commodities and other support groups.

Extension must have strong programs that earn support from decision makers. Then, when a budget plan is developed and communicated well ahead of time, and faculty have made contact with legislators and support groups, it is possible for Extension to rely on the more traditional approach—that is, sharing information with advisory councils and clientele so they can contact legislators. In Oregon there is a strong expectation from administration that Extension faculty will be actively involved with clientele and elected officials concerning Extension's local, state, and federal budgets.

Conclusion

Extension administrators have a responsibility in preparing faculty to be effective in the political world. They need to provide the plans and budgets to faculty and provide the resources to learn the skills for successful interaction with elected officials. Communication between levels of Extension becomes critical if faculty are to be effective. There are many pitfalls, but there can be ample rewards in the form of a stable or higher Extension budget.

Extension faculty are involved in politics whether they want to be or not. To be effective, faculty need to know their role—and their boundaries. When they err or are challenged, they need to know how to respond. It is often said, "All politics is local." Our Extension motto might be: "All programs are political." Therefore, we need to make sure faculty have the political acumen they—and we—need.

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