



Directions for Public Policy Programming

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Public policy education is one of three directions taken by Extension educators in public policy¹. The other two are advocacy and organizational maintenance. If you are designing a public policy education program that focuses on a public concern, it may be well to define and understand the differences among these three directions.

- Public policy education is a planned process for providing information, process training, and leadership skill development to clientele.
- Advocacy means working for a particular solution to a public problem.
- Organizational maintenance is the process of generating support for or retaining public funding for a specific program (for example, Cooperative Extension).

These three directions have very different goals. However, they often are “lumped” together and labeled generically as public policy programming. This publication discusses why each direction is important, to whom and on what occasions, and what potential problems

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each may have. It is hoped that, in knowing the differences among these three, you will not inadvertently weave in and out of them in designing your public policy education program, or think they will all lead to the same place. Rather, being able to distinguish among them, you can apply each one when the appropriate occasion arises.

Public Policy Education

Public policy education is the provision of information, process training, and certain types of leadership skill development to help the public become involved in decisionmaking regarding public issues. Although a variety of components and a range of models may be used, the focus of such programs is to help people understand the issue or problem, to explore the alternatives and consequences of various solutions, to describe the decision-making process, and to

enhance their skills in effecting change.

Public policy education is most consistent with the democratic process. It requires a strong intellectual commitment to that process, and, perhaps, less commitment to a particular issue. For example, after conducting programs that help people better understand the legislative process, the methods of effective citizen involvement, and so on, program participants may proudly report that they are using that information to bring about change. Such reports can concern the Extension educator, if citizen action is in support of or against an issue about which the Extension educator may have a strong, opposing, personal commitment. It is unrealistic to think that Extension personnel can be neutral on every issue; but it is the responsibility of the Extension public policy educator to present the information in a manner that allows for differing viewpoints.

Advocacy

Advocacy refers to a situation where an Extension educator proposes one position or supports one group in the policy debate. Extension educators should avoid such a situation because of the possible risks to the Extension Service.² An Extension educator whose professional career has been devoted to seeking information on a specific topic may find it difficult, if not impossible, to present the variety of policy alternatives without recommending a particular choice. For example, an Extension food and nutrition specialist might naturally have strong opinions on nutrition monitoring, or the regulation of weight-loss clinics. Or an Extension family life specialist may have a certain base of information and expertise regarding subjects such as child abuse

or appropriate and adequate day care. Or there is the expertise of Extension agricultural specialists concerning price supports, pesticides, other rural economic issues, and so on.

While some Extension specialists believe they have a responsibility to share their recommendations and the results of their research, care should be taken. Extension specialists cannot remain credible if they play the advocacy role too often.

Organizational Maintenance

Organizational maintenance generally garners little discussion. Yet, it is a direction that should not be ignored. When Extension staff members are dealing with public policy education, they are interacting with people and issues tied to the very decisionmaking process that affects the level of funding and, indeed, the very existence of Cooperative Extension.

Public policy education is not synonymous with maintaining support for Extension. At the same time, it seems counterproductive to assert that there will not be occasions when dilemmas arise related to public policy education and to support for Extension. The very nature of public policy education centers on conflict; thus, the ongoing potential for questions and concerns related to support for Extension. Consider some of these diverse examples:

- Programming dealing with child-care policies may cause concern for legislators whose definition of family precludes the need for such services. (This same dilemma exists in a variety of other issues.)
- Proposals to lower taxes significantly may adversely affect or, in fact, imperil the very existence of Cooperative Extension. Ironically, some of the strongest Extension supporters often are the proponents of such proposals.
- A local question to levy a tax to support Extension presents a potentially awkward position for Extension staff members.
- Questions may be raised about the

wisdom of using the financial support of an organization that lobbies on specific issues (commodity groups, interest groups, and others) to present programming information on policy concerns.

Some General Observations

As mentioned, it is not unusual for the three directions for public policy programming to overlap in various ways. Extension professionals should observe the following basic principles in public policy programming:

- Extension educators must establish and maintain a reputation as credible sources of objective educational information. For example, the Cooperative Extension Service might provide Extension education on all statewide ballot proposals, whether or not they are controversial. Thus, when there is an issue on the ballot that also would affect CES funding, the credibility of CES is already established.
- The programming role of public policy education and the administrative role of obtaining support for the Cooperative Extension Service need to be clearly delineated. At the state level, it is perhaps easier to make this distinction in terms of personnel. Usually, at the state level, an administrator is responsible for budget-related efforts and a specialist conducts educational programs. At the county level, the distinctions may be considerably less clear--responsibilities and contact may be focused, at different times, in both directions.
- An Extension educator's personal opinion can be clearly distinguished from an educational presentation. A county Extension director commented that the presentations on a tax proposal would be strictly public policy education. But, if in another setting, clientele asked his views, he would not hesitate to express his concern about the potential effects on higher education.
- At all levels of Extension, the

audience for programs, particularly leadership development and public policy education programs, may become an active support group for the Cooperative Extension Service. But that does not mean that such an outcome is a goal in itself.

While public policy education should be the goal of Extension public policy programming, there are times when the other two directions are legitimate--for exercising your rights as a private citizen or keeping the Extension organization fiscally healthy. Public policy education, advocacy, and organizational maintenance also may overlap at times. The key is to understand what direction you are selecting, and why. Your ability to use all three directions discriminately will ultimately increase your credibility when you choose to be a public policy educator.

Roles for Public Policy Educators

Is there only one way to educate people about public policy decisions? Learners sometimes get that idea. They see some public policy specialist in action; think he or she is very impressive; and jump to the conclusion that his or hers is the right way to do the job. Too bad! Much of the most difficult public policy education occurs in the early stages of issue formation, and much of that is being done by county Extension agents who are not even sure whether a problem is going to become a public issue.

There are several ways of conducting public policy education. We do not all have to use the same approach. Obviously, we will not. Some of us are great at arranging conferences and workshops. Some are great analysts. Some look forward to giving a speech or a lecture. This variety reflects the fact that Extension agents and specialists get involved in different situations or at different stages in the evolution of a public issue. With a variety of public policy education tools, a repertoire, you, as an Extension

educator, can match an educational opportunity with appropriate methods.

The five roles of the Extension educator in public policy education are:

- **Forecaster.** Involves anticipation of emerging problems and policy issues. The forecaster role is not easy, but it is useful to try to predict important future issues.
- **Adviser.** People frequently ask our advice. Sometimes it is about matters that are public issues. Sometimes they ask for one thing to feel us out on another. When controversy is likely, clientele behavior is harder to interpret. (This is a bit tricky.) We can advise on process or provide information, but we must be careful not to give out opinions if we're trying to remain objective.
- **Process facilitator.** Extension agents often are asked to become involved in an issue and to follow it through to resolution. Extension specialists get asked to do this, too, but they have a little more leeway because they usually do not live in the community with the problem. It demonstrates a tried-and-true method for facilitating. Facilitating a policymaking process while remaining objective about the outcome is a challenge, so it helps to have a process that you find functional.
- **Information provider/analyst.** In some ways, the role of information provider is the easiest. Although facts often are disputed amid controversy, most people respect scientific information. The information provided either develops information, helps others develop information, serves as liaison to experts, or interprets information. Information is the "commodity" that brings the highest "market price." We do so much of our work in this role that it dominates our image. It is also easiest to communicate to clients and support groups, such as legislators.
- **Program developer** is one role that we all perform--more or less. Some of us are good at it; all of us should be. Planning public policy education programs requires many special considerations.

Our favorite public policy education methods should not confine us to only one or two of these roles, or prevent us from calling colleagues who have different skills. Moreover, if we are to teach others public policy education or assist them, we need to be open to the idea that there are several legitimate roles possible for Extension public policy educators.

Think again of the definition of public policy education. It may be done in at least these three ways:

- Clients may need information — information about existing policy — or assistance in analyzing alternatives and consequences of possible action.
- Many Extension clients want training in the policymaking process. How do policy decisions get made? What legal processes are available? How can clients participate effectively in public policy formation?
- Leadership training that leads to involvement in public decisions is a third possibility. Unless clients have the skill and feel confident about participating, they will not do it! Leadership training also can result in confident, competent clients who can assist you in delivering public policy education programs.

Determine whether you will start a new Extension program or integrate public policy education components into a project in which you are already involved.

Consider these five criteria for choosing your program's focus:

- Is the topic or concern of public interest? As educators, we often work with producers, families, or individuals on problems they are trying to solve to improve their lives. These problems may apply only to their special situations--their private interests. For a topic to justify a public policy education effort, it has to be of concern to a large number of people, with the potential for being resolved through policy. For example, assisting a producer in developing a market plan that will increase his or her profit is probably

not a public concern. When a whole community of producers is in need because existing philosophies or regulations are holding back their profits, this becomes a public concern that might provide an opportunity for public policy education.

- *Is it controversial?* In public policy education, we focus on issues to help people make good decisions about the policies that govern them. Issues are controversial. Opinions differ as to what is "good," how to take action, and how to get resources to finance the action. If there is no controversy, you do not have an issue. The real issues or controversies lie in the questions: "What is the best plan for changing this circumstance or situation?" and "Who pays?" If these decisions are not controversial, perhaps you should pick another focus for a public policy education program because the problem is already resolved, or very close to being resolved.
- *What is your information base?* You do not have to be an expert on an issue to educate about it. But, it is important to know what information is available and whether or not it is accessible. Some issues are so completely determined by people's values — abortion is an example — that science has little to contribute to their resolution. In general, scientific information is the most important resource the Extension educator has.
- *Are you really interested in the issue?* Public policy education topics require persistence, often over long periods of time. To "stick with it," you, as the Extension educator, have to make a commitment to see it through. A secondary analysis of why you are interested also is important. If your biases outweigh your objectivity as an Extension educator--you had better reconsider!
- *Is the timing right?* Beginning a public policy education effort on a certain topic too soon--before it has become a public concern--may only frustrate those involved. Who cares--yet? Coming in too late is ineffective.

Polarization may have occurred or the concern may already be on its way to resolution. Determining the “teachable moments” or best intervention times is a skill that can be developed as you involve yourself in public policy education. Keeping in touch with community leaders, media reports, and national trends will help you decide which issues to explore, and when.

Then, reevaluate the program direction you plan to take. Keeping in mind the differences between public policy education, advocacy, and organizational maintenance, check to see that you are following the public policy education “path,” without exception! This precaution is vital to your credibility as a public policy educator in Extension.

What role(s) will you play?

- Information provider/analyst?
- Educational program developer?
- Adviser?
- Process trainer?
- Forecaster?

Let’s review again the approaches that will help you deal with the controversies that inevitably arise as you address important issues. To manage controversy, it helps to:

- Time programs so they take place before “sides” are polarized.
- Touch base with leaders on various sides of the issue before beginning your program.
- Know your own biases and work at being objective.
- Include resource people with objective analysis who can balance the program and represent all views.
- Use the alternative-consequences approach, as it allows participants to

choose options according to their own beliefs and values.

- Collaborate, when possible, with other educators. The more people you can involve who have objective approaches and educational intentions, the more credible your program will be — and your risk will be lessened.
- Know the audience for whom each activity is planned. Knowing them automatically prepares you to expect certain types of behavior. The old truism, “forewarned is forearmed,” applies.
- Plan agenda or lessons carefully to lend control and a no-nonsense feeling to meetings that might otherwise offer opportunities for blowups or heated exchanges.
- If your group process skills are weak, get a skilled partner to help plan and conduct public policy education programs.
- Inform your Extension administrator about your plans.

Controversy is not to be feared. It can be managed so that it generates new ideas and coalitions. Those are the components needed to resolve difficult public issues.

Then remember you are planning an educational program, not just a single event or series of unrelated events. A program differs from individual events and activities because it is designed to provide continuity, to offer different kinds of learning opportunities to different types of audiences. A program approach also ensures that good educational practices are incorporated, going from needs assessment, to evaluation, and back around the “learning loop.”

Regarding reliability and credibility, make sure you have access to

appropriate information, research, and resource people. Assess who and what is available before planning each educational activity. Extension must present reliable information, in an unbiased way. As the outreach arm of the land-grant system, this is Extension’s mandate.

Now, for the actual designing of your program:

- Review effective educational program procedures to refresh your memory.
- Use a variety of methods and strategies, matching them to the needs of the audience.
- Review other principles and ideas in designing your plan.

Most important, remember the reason you are doing this program: “If the democratic process is to function, citizens must be well-informed and have the opportunity to participate in policy decisions.”

Other publications in the series are:

IP-18 Introduction to Public Policy Education

IP-19 Public Policymaking in America
IP-20 Public Policy: Facts, Myths, and Values

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