



A Guideline for Public Issues Education in the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service

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The Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service has a long history of public issues education. Agricultural economists provide leadership for efforts in public policy education, especially involving economic viability of farming. Family Community Leadership, the Appalachian Civic Leadership project, the Phillip Morris Agricultural Development program, and other leadership programs address issues which impact families and communities. The 4-H/Youth Development issues programming provides leadership to community groups in the process of identifying important youth issues. Extension home economists help develop policies aimed at infant health and nutrition programs for local communities. Extension sociologists and Extension agents train elected officials and community leaders in alternative dispute resolution methods.

Leadership for achieving an educated citizenry is identified as a vital issue by Kentucky Cooperative Extension and communities throughout Kentucky. The Extension Service recognizes that leadership for the 21st century must address the deepest needs and aspirations of its people in county, area, and state activities.

Public issues education provides Extension an opportunity to apply the knowledge and research from the Land Grant University system to issues of broad public concern and to help educate citizens in better informed decision making. Extension has a role to play in public issues education and a responsibility to conduct such education, as the need arises, which is consistent with the resource base of the University.

Public issues education is based on the premise that the individual is the best judge of his or her needs while recognizing the legitimate role of education to enable the individual to become a better decision maker.

The Place of Public Issues Education in the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service

Public issues education is a major component of Cooperative Extension Service activities and is envisioned as a vital and important resource for the state into the 21st century. Extension should be known for its ability to:

- initiate public discourse before positions have hardened or a crisis point is reached;
- draw all interested parties into public discourse;
- increase understanding of all points of view in public issues;
- address controversial issues fairly;
- introduce relevant academic knowledge and expand the knowledge base by communicating research needs to the academic community;
- facilitate active learning and discovery by involving participants in analysis, forecasting, strategic planning, and problem solving; broaden the range of alternatives and discover new approaches to solving public issues;
- increase the likelihood of collaborative solutions;
- help people and communities assess needs, anticipate emerging issues and determine their implications.
- train citizens and leaders in conflict resolution analysis and methods;
- train citizens and leaders about public problem-solving processes.

The Extension Service's programming in public issues education is based on these core assumptions, values, and beliefs:

- **Education** is a powerful tool for improving the quality of public choices. Informed decision making is a cornerstone of effective participation in the democratic process.
- **Dialogue** among people from diverse backgrounds and vantage points 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.
- **Capacity building** through education may enable non-participants to become involved in public discourse. This may allow for collaborative solutions previously not possible. The opportunity for every person to learn is crucial.

Throughout its history, the Extension Service has addressed public issues by disseminating neutral science-based information, fostering dialogue and mutual understanding, exploring alternative solutions and their consequences and trade-offs, and reaching diverse audiences. The strategies and action steps in public issues education build on that history to make an even greater contribution to the citizens of Kentucky.

Organizational Understanding and Commitment

1. All members of the Cooperative Extension Service are encouraged to understand and value public issues education.
2. All staff are encouraged to have the ability and opportunity to educate about public issues.
3. Extension staff are encouraged to facilitate the practical application of research-based knowledge related to public issues and stimulate the development of additional scholarly activity.

Role of the Extension Professional

Extension educators must be able to work with special interest groups while remaining independent of them. Extension public issues educators make their expertise available to everyone but serve no person or group as a staff person.

The Extension educator must deal with facts, which are verifiable statements; myths, which are what people perceive to be true; and values, which are standards of desirability. Value conflicts are to be expected and are the source of greatest friction in dealing with public issues education. Public problems involve value judgements. In this context, Extension public issues education helps re-

place myths with research-based facts. It also works objectively in the context of peoples' values by remaining neutral and working to create receptive minds which respect the values of all involved. It is inappropriate and usually counterproductive for the public issues educator to assume an advocacy role.

The Extension professional plays a number of key roles in public issues education. The individual serves as a forecaster and futurist in foreseeing issues of broad public concern. He or she serves as an advisor by helping groups sift through facts and values. Neutrality is paramount. The professional serves as a facilitator by formatting the educational meeting, setting ground rules, and focusing the group's attention on the decision-making process while remaining unaligned with any advocacy group involved. As an information provider, the Extension professional is an unbiased source of information to everyone and every group involved in public issues. And he or she can provide resource people, specialists, and others who can help interpret what facts might mean in different contexts. As a program developer, the Extension professional must have a long-range plan for the educational program and a set of short-range actions to implement the plan.

Public issues education lends itself to a systemized approach. The necessary steps include:

1. Identifying concern or issues;
2. Documenting the history and current situation;
3. Analyzing the political implications;
4. Considering information available, the values of groups concerned, and the advocacy of groups;
5. Identifying Extension's educational role;
6. Selecting a method of conducting the program; and
7. Designing and implementing the program.

Institutional Support

The Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service administration endorses participation in public issues education efforts. The administration will fully support well planned and executed public issues education programs that are balanced, based on scientifically derived information, and facilitate collaborative problem solving among citizens of diverse interests and values.