



WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
EXTENSION

WSU EXTENSION ADVISORY COMMITTEE GUIDELINES

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This material was initially adapted in 2008 from a Michigan State University Extension publication compiled by Elizabeth Moore.

EXTENSION ADVISORY COMMITTEES: Overview

The creation of Extension Committees/Councils/Boards (referred to as Committees in this document) is based on these basic assumptions:

Every resident has something of value to contribute.

- Residents have a role in shaping their organizations, communities, and governments.
- Resident participation is necessary to develop the Extension educational programming that best meets the needs of the local community.
- The interaction among Committee members--each representing different experiences, backgrounds, and values--promotes a deeper understanding which improves the work of Extension. This interaction also fosters creative approaches for addressing issues of concern in the community.

The setting for this work with Extension Advisory Committees is focused on counties and statewide programs, but the basic principles that underlie this effort can be applied to a variety of settings and scales. The central idea is to bring together a group of individuals who will work in partnerships with the convening WSU Extension organization to support efforts to develop and carry out educational programming that best reflects the needs and diversity of the community or state.

Local Extension Advisory System

Communities and programs are expected to have an on-going WSU Extension Advisory System that has diverse representation, identifies and prioritizes local issues, reviews the educational programming and project activities, and advocates for the support of WSU Extension. While WSU Extension educators are charged with using an advisory system that may include focus groups, surveys, key informant; the advisory Committee maybe the only advisory system method that lends to the development of advocates for WSU Extension and the programs the agency delivers. Hence this document provides information that WSU Extension leaders may find helpful in developing advisory committees to prioritize local issues, review educational programming, and advocate for the support of WSU Extension.

Potential Functions of Extension Advisory Committees:

- Identify community assets, issues, and concerns that Extension can and should address, and prioritize according to need and available resources.
- Identify other community organizations/agencies to collaborate in addressing specific issues or which might contribute to co-creation of public benefits.
- Assist in evaluating the progress of Extension programming
- Identify potential resources and provide support for acquiring the resources necessary to address program initiatives.
- Communicate to others the availability and value of Extension's educational programming and project activity.
- Advocate for WSU Extension, for its programs, and for the impacts of those programs, to policymakers.

THE PURPOSE OF AN EXTENSION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

"If you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organization or community."

David Chrislip and Carl Larson, Collaborative Leadership

WSU Extension is both reactive and proactive on issues of concern in local communities, regionally, and statewide. An organized, diverse group of residents coming together on a regular basis to focus on the work of Extension can react to concerns and anticipate developing issues. The work of the WSU Extension Advisory Committee needs to be issue-focused, reflecting changing situations.

The most important underlying principles include:

- Committee membership that reflects the full diversity of the community.
- Committee members engaging in identifying the issues of primary concern and identifying appropriate educational approaches.
- Committee members prepared to regularly articulate to others--including policymakers at all levels--the importance of Extension's educational programming and project activities.
- Committee members having access to experiences that enhance leadership skills and to information that addresses issues of interest.

Establishing a WSU Extension Advisory Committee

Consideration should be given to a variety of factors when establishing a committee, including:

- What is the purpose?
- What type of advisory structure has existed in the past?
- Who should be included in the initial planning process?

If a committee currently exists or has existed in the recent past, an informal *transition committee* can be important in working to establish a new committee. The transition group could be composed of a few members of a former committee, as well as current collaborators and key leaders in the community. These individuals should be familiar with Extension and have a broad view of the issues and concerns facing the community or program. They can help identify and recruit members and can also plan and implement the orientation for the newly formed committee.

Deciding on a Structure. No single recommendation exists as to the "right" way to organize a WSU Extension Advisory Committee. The structure will differ depending on community and purpose. Influencing factors include:

- *Composition and diversity of the group*--Decisions need to be made about the number of interests and groups that need to be represented on the committee.
- *Current issues of major concern*--The composition of the Committee may need to change at times in order to help address specific concerns (e.g. land use, youth issues).

Size of Committee. Extension Advisory Committees need to be large enough to be truly representative of the community or program, but small enough to allow for discussion and easy communication. A range of 12- 20 members is often cited for such a group. A larger committee

could operate, in part, through subcommittees. A smaller committee might want to devise ways to gather input from other interests on a regular basis.

Length of Term. The goal is to constitute a WSU Extension Advisory Committee that is stable enough to serve its purpose, and yet has enough turnover of members to ensure new thinking and new representation. Limiting the renewal of appointments is one possible approach.

Number of Meetings. The membership needs to determine a plan for communication and a schedule for meetings. If a group only meets once or twice a year, with little ongoing communication, then their active, vital involvement is in question. However, if a group meets too frequently over a sustained period of time, participation is likely to diminish. The key is to help the group find a way to balance the realities of time-constraints with the need for ongoing discussion and a connection with current issues. It will also be important to encourage the use of alternate means of communication. As the committee is forming, it might be useful to suggest an initial schedule of regular meetings (monthly, bi-monthly) in order to build a sense of community within the group and to provide sufficient time for networking and for examining current issues of concern.

Determining a time for the committee to meet is difficult and this may change over time to better reflect the needs of the membership. A common suggestion, though, is the benefit of establishing the schedule of meetings for the entire year, or at least several months in advance.

Committee Leadership. The decisions about a leadership structure can be made by the group itself, or by a transitional team of advisors. A variety of approaches could include: rotating chairpersons, a chairperson for a year, co-chairpersons; selection by appointment, by self-volunteering, by election.

Committee Membership

Identifying Members. Decisions about the composition of any WSU Extension Advisory Committee may be the most important part of working with such groups. Identifying the partners needs to be done in a purposeful, deliberate manner, with advice from a variety of sources, including Extension staff and key community or program leaders. Selection of committee members needs to be viewed as an ongoing process, not something that is fixed forever. As members become more familiar with serving in this role, they can share the responsibility for ensuring that the committee continues to have a diverse and representative membership and is forward thinking.

Diversity. This should be the driving force for the selection of the WSU County Extension Advisory Committee members and includes having people who represent the diversity of:

- geography
- age, including youth as appropriate
- race and ethnicity
- gender
- socio-economic status
- program area (in community-based committees)
- ideas and interests
- other characteristics relevant to the purpose of the committee (eg., representation from specific partners important in a community or for a program)

Identifying committee members needs to take on a *future-focus*, not limited to the people and organizations that have been involved with Extension in the past. It is important to gather together partners who represent a range of experiences and different levels of familiarity with the work of

Extension. Committee members can mentor each other (perhaps a deliberate pairing), thus sharing specific knowledge about Extension overall, specific programs, and about local community issues. Questions to consider during the process of identifying committee members include:

- What are the key organizations addressing major Extension topic areas (agriculture, environmental protection, economic development, children, youth and family issues, diversity)? It will be important to include representation from various organizations that likely have different viewpoints on each topic.
- Which organizations are working to address a variety of community issues?
- Which organizations and/or individuals have particularly strong linkages to policymakers at different levels?
- Who are the identifiable *opinion leaders*, representing various segments of the community (particular locations, age groups, ethnic groups), even if they don't hold formal positions?
- What are some of the active grassroots organizations whose work is related to Extension topic areas? Examples might include neighborhood organizations, parent associations, or other issue-focused groups.
- Who are the major business/economic interests in the county, particularly those who may work in partnership with Extension on issues of current concern?

In summary, identifying WSU Extension Advisory Committee members should be a dynamic, ongoing process. Relationships with Committee members will hopefully be a long-term connection, whether or not the person comes to meetings or is actively involved over a long period of time.

Recruiting Members. Inviting someone to become a WSU Extension Advisory Committee member is best done through personal contact. The person who is likely to connect best with this potential member should make the contact. This might be a staff member, or another committee member. In addition to making a formal invitation, it is sometimes beneficial to solicit membership through flyers and other less formal means. This can help broaden membership beyond individuals that the current group is familiar with. During the process of recruiting committee members, it is important to be able to answer the questions about what this person will bring to the group, what their role will be and what will be the benefits of membership.

Why is this person being asked to be a member of the WSU Extension Advisory Committee?

Identify the *connecting points* between Extension in the community or context and the work that this potential committee member is involved with (e.g., mutual interest in providing educational experiences for youth, offering educational resources concerning the environment, improving the economic viability in the area).

What are the benefits to them of serving on the WSU Extension Advisory Committee?

- Ability to network with others who share similar interests and concerns
- Opportunity to help shape local programming efforts which are important to the residents in that county
- Opportunity to gather support for establishing and/or extending educational efforts around issues of concern in the county
- Opportunity to participate in leadership and issue-focused educational events.

What does WSU Extension need from them?

- Assistance with identifying and framing the issues of concern to the local community or specific program
- Help with evaluating community-based or statewide programming
- Help with communicating to others the value of Extension's educational programming

What type of commitment is a person making in joining the WSU Extension Advisory Committee?

- Agreement to be an active participant for a length of time determined by the relevant director.
- Willingness to carry out the stated expectations of a WSU Extension Advisory Committee
- Agreement to work cooperatively with other members to determine the work of the committee
- Willingness to share information within their own social/business/community networks.

Retaining Members. There will be an ongoing need to balance continuity and accomplishment with the needs for diversity and representing current issues and concerns, and to stay attuned to the concerns, interests and personal situations of the membership. Some method of consciously pairing members may also be a way to provide avenues for communication and assessment.

When members end their period of involvement with the committee, it is important to identify specific ways to continue their special connection to Extension and to help them stay informed about the work of Extension.

Learning Opportunities for WSU Extension Advisory Committee Members. Serving on the WSU Extension Advisory Committee needs to be a mutually beneficial experience for the organization and for the membership. People are more willing to give of their time, their counsel, and their active involvement, if they also see ways to access information, make connections, and build skills. As an integral part of the work of the WSU Extension Advisory Committee, attention needs to be given to continually providing opportunities for committee members to share and to learn. *Examples include:*

- Linking a member with a resource person at the university
- Providing access to specialized training for specific members
- Designing a special learning experience for the entire committee (e.g. a visit to any of the WSU campuses, Research and Extension Centers, or Extension offices, and/or the state capitol, or a visit to see a particular programming effort in a neighboring community).

Helping New Members Understand Extension. It is very important to help new people become integrated members of the WSU Extension Advisory Committee. They need to be given information so that they are knowledgeable about Extension generally, as well as the work of the committee.

A few basic strategies include:

- Scheduling an informal orientation session
- Providing a packet of information about Extension
- Pairing up a new member and a continuing member.

EXTENSION ADVISORY COMMITTEES: Working Together as a Group

Here are some basic concepts that will set the tone for developing a productive and cohesive group.

At the First Meeting. At the first meeting of a new committee, and also at meetings where new members are joining an existing group, it is extremely important to pay close attention to developing a sense of community within this group. Don't neglect this process in an effort to tell members everything there is to know about WSU Extension.

It is also important, though, to begin with the first meeting in building a firm base of understanding about educational programming and the linkage with the state's land grant university

Setting the agenda for subsequent meetings should be seen as a group effort. Try to balance the showcasing of Extension programming with opportunities for networking among members, centered around the issues of concern within the community or program. Consider how those issues can be addressed--by Extension alone or in coalition with others.

Help the group pay attention to *process*. Over time, develop ground rules and strategies for dealing with conflict. Make certain that everyone's voice is heard. Agree on the appropriate methods for decision-making. Revisit these ground rules periodically.

From the beginning, design ways that the group can effectively *take stock* of how it is functioning.

Building a Sense of Community. Group solidarity develops out of mutual trust and respect, which grows over time and allows members to feel free to express opinions and feelings and to disagree without fear of consequences. If the WSU Extension Advisory Committee is truly diverse, it may be important to consciously help the group go through a specific process to identify their commonalities and differences. This is extremely important to do in the beginning of the committee's work together, and then repeatedly as the group changes. A sense of community is built through having an opportunity to know and understand each other, and through giving each committee member an opportunity to fully contribute to the group. Group activities can build common understanding *and* the development of a group culture that fosters total group involvement.

The Components of a Group. One helpful approach to thinking about the work of the WSU Extension Advisory Committee is to recognize the three major components of a group coming together to address specific functions (*Adapted from University of Virginia Extension materials*):

- **Interaction**--This refers to the way participants work together while processing information. This includes the participant's feelings, attitudes, and expectations that will have a bearing on how they participate, cooperate, listen, trust, and work together. Background and experience will help shape these feelings and attitudes.
- **Content**--The information, knowledge, experience, opinions, and ideas that are presented and shared at the meeting.
- **Structure**--The way in which both the information and participants are organized in order to achieve the objectives of the group.

It is important to work to keep these three components in balance. A meeting that is simply a social interaction leaves participants feeling as if they wasted time. On the other hand, a meeting that is simply a presentation of information misses the opportunity for group involvement and input. Structural issues

(how the group operates, how decisions are made, etc.) are extremely important and they need to provide the underlying framework.

Agenda Setting. The agenda needs to be shaped by the committee. One technique is to use time at the end of a meeting to decide the agenda for the next meeting, grouping items in these three categories:

- Decisions that need to be made
- Issues for group discussion
- Information that needs to be provided (reports, data, etc)

This technique then allows for assigning responsibility and building continuity between sessions.

Group Discussion. There are also many different techniques for facilitating group discussion. The group should pursue different approaches appropriate for their situation, both for use during committee meetings and for other community information-gathering sessions.

Decision-Making. There are many different techniques for group decision-making. The purpose and expectations of the WSU Extension Advisory Committee seems to link most appropriately with *consensus decision-making*. The bringing together of diverse group of residents to assist Extension in addressing issues of local or programmatic concern lends itself to building consensus.

Dealing with Problems and Conflict. When one brings together a diverse group of residents; there will undoubtedly be conflict, differing goals, and differing timelines. The committee will function effectively in a collaborative relationship only if there is open recognition of these realities, and a group willingness to adopt strategies for moving forward.

It is important that a WSU Extension Advisory Committee develop strategies to accept conflict as natural. Conflict is an opportunity to examine the issues involved in depth and to learn more about the underlying values and assumptions held by individual members. Bringing conflict out in the open helps lead to a discussion that may lead to a better solution.

Disagreement needs to be focused on the issue not the person.

Here are a few of the problems that may occur with the WSU Extension Advisory Committee and some very brief strategies for dealing with such situations (Adapted from The University of Virginia Extension):

Clarifying the real issue--Group members need to feel comfortable in identifying their interests (and the interest of the group they represent). WSU Extension staff members also need to be clear in what is really needed and/or appropriate in a specific situation.

People not coming to meetings--Individuals will participate in different issues, activities and groups only to the extent that their needs are being met. Careful attention needs to be given to providing *regular check-ups* on how the group is functioning.

People dominating the meeting and people not participating in the discussion--Skillful group facilitation techniques can be helpful in both of these situations. Having the group designate ground rules may be helpful. Using some agreed upon technique to moderate the situation may also be useful. Non-participation may mean that someone is simply observing, but the facilitator needs to be particularly alert to provide *entry* opportunities.

EXTENSION ADVISORY COMMITTEES: The Issue Identification Role

Issue identification should be an ongoing, institutionalized process that is central to the work of the WSU Extension Advisory Committee. This role is likely to be of continuing interest to Committee members who are interested in a diversity of issues of concern locally or around a programmatic focus.

Issues are matters of widespread public concern. Public issues are controversial, lack easy answers, and are seldom solved. The committee can provide a forum for bringing together different ideas, approaches, and resources in order to address the issue in a sustainable, community-centered manner. An *issue-focused committee* shifts the attention from Extension's structural framework (program areas etc.) to focusing on the concerns in local communities or statewide programs. The Committee cannot *solve* the issue, but it can help mobilize educational resources to address the situation. Over time, the Committee will probably view a variety of issues, with working groups possibly forming to address specific strategies.

The *value-added* that WSU Extension is able to bring to bear on an issue in a community or a statewide program is the capacity for education and providing research-based knowledge which can be applied to local issues and opportunities. Making this distinction may help members see other possible collaborators. The resulting network that will form out of such an approach can make important contributions within the county. Washington's land grant university can facilitate a network for identifying applied research possibilities, providing information, and connecting potential resources.

Basic criteria to use in any issue identification process include:

- The issue, problem or concern falls within the Extension mission.
- The issue can be addressed through educational and evidence-based strategies.
- There is expertise available through WSU or WSU Extension to help address the issue.
- Others have identified the issue as being of great concern in the county.

Ongoing Program Evaluation. With the input from a diverse group of residents who care about community issues, WSU Extension can be certain that our work remains relevant, productive, and attuned to the changing needs of the community or program. Extension program leaders set the agenda, evaluate progress, and make decisions about future directions. The issue identification process, program design and program evaluation are closely intertwined. Program evaluation is a continuous part of collaborative planning to address issues of local concern and should be conducted by the program with an eye towards program process improvement. This evaluation is informed by, and shared with, the Advisory Committee. This process and appropriate involvement of the Advisory Committee provides evidence that that can be persuasive to funding agencies, legislators, and other key officials.

Critical questions that guide monitoring and evaluation are (Adapted from the University of Virginia Extension):

- What progress are we making toward our goals and objectives?
- Are the strategies we picked helping us to reach our goals and objectives?
- What changes are we seeing in program participants and the condition of the problems/issues we are addressing as a result of our program?

Program Review and Evaluation. A successful program review and evaluation involves a continual monitoring of the external environment along with a look at the specific program and how it is being

carried out. The WSU Extension Advisory Committee can play a major role with that external monitoring by providing perspectives on:

- What is happening now in the community or program? (e.g., construction, or closing of a plant, building of a new store, etc.)
- What is happening in a particular sector? (e.g., people going off welfare)
- What are some of the forces of change? (e.g., new people moving in)

Reporting is the means of capturing and communicating important information and data about the program. What is the impact on people and their communities as a result of our professional investments of time, resources, and energy needs to be summarized and communicated to relevant audiences? Reports are important as a communication instrument, as a method of accountability, and as a basis of planning. Staff will generally be responsible for the actual collection of data. However, WSU Extension Advisory Committee members can play an important role in helping communicate that information to key leaders.

A WSU Extension Advisory Committees might play a role in assessing the overall fit between programming strategies and the needs of the community or statewide program. It is not a role of performance evaluation. The questions are general:

- Are we on the right track with this effort?
- What could be changed?
- What other resources and/or collaborations are needed?
- How does this fit with the interests of our policymakers?

EXTENSION ADVISORY COMMITTEES: The Public Role

Public Relations Role. *Public relations* refers to developing the awareness of the many different educational roles that Extension plays, and talking about them in a wide variety of settings. This can be differentiated from *advocacy* in that it is ongoing and continual, not focused on a particular issue or funding need. Good public relations skills can be fostered among committee members by providing them with a variety of opportunities to experience the full scope of Extension programming and activities (visits, demonstrations, discussions with program participants etc.).

Identifying and Obtaining Resources. The WSU Extension Advisory Committee members might assist with resource development through their networking and their connections to a wide array of organizations and agencies within the county. They may be able to identify grant possibilities, identify in-kind contributions, or help solicit special funding.

Residents Advocating for Extension. Extension is a publicly funded (state, county and federal) entity and it is imperative that we be responsive to our stakeholders. As government funding declines, it becomes even more important that residents be able to clearly articulate to policymakers at all levels of government the impact of Extension programming now and in the future. The advocacy role is extremely important for the WSU Extension Advisory Committee.

Underlying observations about advocacy:

- We need to be continually working at building relationships with policymakers at all levels of government around issues of concern in the county.

- We need to always remember that policymakers are most interested in information that is locally specific and that shows the direct impact of a program on their constituents.
- The dynamic interaction among the diverse membership on the WSU Extension Advisory Committee can strengthen the message that is communicated to policymakers. (For example, when urban and rural members build a common base of understanding about the issue of land use, they become especially strong advocates for the educational role that Extension can play on this issue.)
- A Committee that draws its membership from all sectors of the community or state will have connections in different ways to various policymakers.
- Those who sincerely feel that Extension's educational programming is important want to share that information with the policymakers who make funding decisions.

Different Strategies for Advocacy. There are a variety of approaches that can be used to build ongoing linkages between the WSU Extension Advisory Committee and policymakers at the community, state, or federal level. Decisions on an appropriate strategy will depend on the current situation in a particular community or program.

Underlying considerations need to include:

- Developing an understanding of the interests and concerns of the policymakers
- Acquire an understanding of the linkages and interests of the committee members
- Make certain that committee members have access to any information they need about specific programs, and also that they are knowledgeable about the interests of the policymaker
- Plan to develop an ongoing strategy for maintaining communication linkages between the committee members and policymakers, not just in response to a particular funding need.

Specific approaches to building those ongoing linkages might include:

- Asking the committee to host an annual social event which also features information about Extension programming
- Asking individual committee members to become the *connecting person* with individual policymakers
- Encouraging committee members and staff to work together to host an issue-focused event which highlights our work on a particular issue (e.g. land-use, children's issues).

ASSESSING THE WORKINGS OF THE EXTENSION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

To ensure the ongoing health of the Committee, time needs to be set aside periodically to evaluate the meetings and the work of the committee. This gives members an opportunity to tell what they like about the group, to identify areas of dissatisfaction, and provides a time to plan improvements in the way the group operates. The framework for discussion might be:

- How well-attended and productive are the meetings of the committee?
- How is the committee doing in meeting its goals?
- What might be done differently in the future?
- How are individual members feeling about their involvement in the committee?

Specific questions that the staff and the membership can use to jointly and evaluate their work:

- Does the group truly represent the diversity of the population in the community or state?
- Is there adequate ongoing communication between staff and the committee?
- Are all members willing and able to explain to others--friends, co-workers, and policymakers--the impact and value of Extension and its educational programming?
- Do members meet the interests and needs of both members and staff?

Possible outcomes of such a review include:

- The assessment that everything is working wonderfully and nothing should be changed.
- The decision that meetings need to become more participatory.
- Identification of the need to recruit new members, perhaps seeking representation from different sectors of the community or state.
- The decision that more learning opportunities need to be developed for committee members. The understanding that the committee needs to work to finding more common ground among its membership.

The internal interaction among WSU Extension Advisory Committee members should be viewed as an ongoing process, always under development. The way that the Committee operates internally directly affects the relevance and importance of its work in the community. The WSU Extension Advisory Committee is part of the dynamic force to ensure that WSU Extension's educational programming most effectively addresses the issues of concern in each community or statewide program.