



Volunteer Administration in the 21st Century

Interpreting Extension Programs through Leadership Advisory Boards

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Accountability is becoming increasingly important to federal, state, and local funders of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service. To help promote the Extension Service and its programs, county Extension agents need to enlist and equip the Leadership Advisory Boards in their counties to become effective spokespeople for county programs and the agency.

The Texas AgriLife Extension Service began forming county Leadership Advisory Boards (LABs) in 2006 and has made it a priority to use them to support and promote Extension's programs across the state.

County agents often believe that they alone are responsible for telling Extension's story locally. However, LAB members are uniquely positioned to interpret Extension's educational programs to client groups across the county. LABs support county programs in six ways (Boleman and Burkham, 2005):

- Reviewing the county Extension program's mission and purpose and the local program's goals, objectives, and primary audiences served

- Developing resources to ensure that high-quality programs can be implemented
- Ensuring and maintaining legal and ethical integrity and accountability
- Monitoring and strengthening educational programs
- Enhancing the county Extension program's public standing
- Serving as the Community and Economic Development Program Area Committee (optional)

Many organizations—large and small—use interpretation of the results of their programs to others as an effective public relations tool (Booth, 1987). Interpretation is used to:

- Build coalitions, credibility, or public support for an issue
- Change the perception of an organization
- Influence legislation
- Promote an event or a name change
- Increase membership or the client base
- Publicize research findings
- Support a fundraising campaign

Understanding the Texas AgriLife Extension Service and its programs

For Leadership Advisory Board members to effectively interpret programs to stakeholders, they must understand the Texas AgriLife Extension Service's structure and embrace its mission.

The Texas AgriLife Extension Service is a three-way collaboration funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), county commissioners in all 254 Texas counties, and the Texas A&M System (Land-Grant University System).

Texas Extension's mission is to provide relevant, high-quality education to improve the lives of people, businesses, and communities across Texas and beyond. More than 1,900 employees and almost 100,000 volunteers, many of whom serve Leadership Advisory Boards, carry out programs in all of Texas' 254 counties. These Extension agents and volunteers develop and implement programs to educate citizens in four main areas:

- Agriculture and natural resources
- Family and consumer sciences
- 4-H and youth development
- Community and resource development

Texas AgriLife Extension's mission is to educate the residents of Texas in these four program areas, enabling Texans to:

- Eat well, stay healthy, manage money, and raise their children to be successful adults
- Live better and avoid financial problems by using tools for economic stability and security
- Be better stewards of the environment and of the state's natural resources

Importance of interpreting results

In many cases, neither the county Extension agents nor the Leadership Advisory Board members feel comfortable interpreting program results to stakeholders. However, an effective way to establish the success of a county program is for the agent or the advisory board to communicate that success to the public and to key stakeholders.

One reason that interpretation is needed is that program performance is under increasing scrutiny, and "fundors, policy makers, and decision makers want data relating to program results,

impacts, and social and economic consequences" (Radhakrishna and Martin, 1999). County Extension agents are held accountable to federal, state, and local governments, all of which are becoming more stringent on the allocation of resources. Therefore, agents must evaluate county programs critically (Taylor, 1998).

County Extension agents can enlist the help of Leadership Advisory Boards to gather critical feedback and modify programs to improve their overall effectiveness. Because members of the LAB must serve as the chief advocates for all county programs, they must be able to clearly articulate the relevance of Extension programs in their counties.

According to Bellavita (1986), evaluators can take four steps to help organizations or programs become more efficient:

1. Identify performance objectives.
2. Assess the performance in terms of those objectives.
3. Identify ways to improve those objectives.
4. Communicate the value of the organization or program.

Each of these steps is vital to Extension and each must receive equal emphasis. Many evaluators, however, often put great effort into planning and implementing evaluations but fail to adequately communicate the evaluation data and program impacts to key stakeholders. The evaluation data can be perfectly valid, but it is a mistake to expect the results to speak for themselves.

When stakeholders do not understand how the evaluation data were collected, it is natural for them to question their validity. To avoid this problem, agents must explain how the evaluation instruments were used to measure performance objectives, and then clearly communicate what the data indicate.

County Extension agents and others can interpret program results more effectively if they know their stakeholders and foster communication with them. According to Wholey, Abramson, and Bellavita (1986), there are five elements to communicating effectively with stakeholders: knowledge about the audience, knowledge about communication, intelligibility of the information, timeliness of the presentation, and communication management (Table 1).

It is important that county Extension agents and Leadership Advisory Boards use these five elements of effective communication.

Table 1. Five elements of effective communication (Wholey, Abramson, and Bellavita, 1986)

| Elements | Steps | Examples |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| Knowledge about the audience | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Determine the key stakeholders who will be present and the type of information they will expect.• Research the type of presentations stakeholders might prefer.• Develop relationships and networks with key stakeholders. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Call people associated with stakeholders to learn about their personal interests, hobbies, families, business endeavors, and affiliations to other organizations.• Form relationships or networks with stakeholders by inviting them to educational events, program area meetings, Leadership Advisory Board meetings, and banquets. |
| Knowledge about communication | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communicate program results effectively to key stakeholders.• Prepare presentations or documents that will be “perceived as fair, accurate, and nontrivial” (Wholey, Abramson, and Bellavita, 1986).• Use multiple communication methods unless the presenter knows the stakeholders’ preferred method.• Clearly state any actions that are to be taken because of the program.• Be authoritative, credible, and knowledgeable. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rehearse before addressing stakeholders.• Solicit feedback on the presentation.• County Extension agents may need to train LAB members on how to communicate effectively. |
| Intelligibility of information | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have a clear, concise idea about what is to be communicated.• Tailor the information to the specific audience.• Present the ideas and information in a way that is easy to understand or read. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Set goals before presenting the material.• Use terminology that the audience can understand easily.• Limit the written material to no more than two pages and oral presentations to 15 minutes plus time for questions.• Make any necessary clarifications.• Follow up immediately with a written thank-you note to the elected official or staff member, summarizing the main points of the presentation. |
| Timeliness of the presentation | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Know when to present information to stakeholders.• Present information during decision-making periods.• Report on successful programs when groups are changing and looking for new ideas. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Present ideas immediately before planning, budgeting, and decision-making cycles. |
| Communication management | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Plan ahead for creating and using educational materials in the county• Devise a game plan for meeting with stakeholders.• Include in the plan ways to interpret the results and the program impact.• Without materials and a plan, one cannot communicate effectively. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Resources needed include: information about stakeholders, professional presentations, and any needed supporting materials.• When planning a presentation, consider time management, audience learning style, type of presentation preferred, and whether stakeholders are going through any change.• A presentation should have no more than three to five key speaking points. |

Identifying stakeholder interests through the Leadership Advisory Board

As agents and advisory boards develop and implement Extension programs, they will need to identify potential stakeholders and interpret program results to them. The goal is to help people understand what Extension is and the value of its educational programs to Texas.

The LAB members will leverage their networking abilities to identify potential stakeholders who can become key advocates for Extension programs.

For example, a business owner who is a LAB member could identify stakeholders in the county to advocate for community development and economic stimulus. The board members' stature in their fields can improve the chances of identifying key stakeholders.

Once these stakeholders are identified, the LAB members must do their homework to understand them. This involves learning as much professional and personal information about them as possible, including the stakeholder's family, hobbies, hometown, community interests, favorite causes, and special interests.

This information about stakeholders will enable the LAB members to better target marketing and interpretation efforts and increase the chances of gaining support for Extension. Use the attached Elected Officials Worksheet to record these individuals' hobbies and interests.

Agents' role in helping Leadership Advisory Boards with interpretation: The first step in establishing a board that can interpret programs successfully is to select appropriate members. Extension agents should establish boards that contain prominent, influential people. Typically, the members are respected businesspeople or other opinion leaders in a county.

The board should also be made up of people from diverse backgrounds. According to Boleman and Burkham (2002), members should represent:

- Each major geographic area of the county
- Organizations that affect or are affected by Extension programs (including potential educational collaborators)
- Each major social and economic group in the county
- People with a major interest in Extension, including youth

- Leaders in agriculture, business, industry, education, civic life, and family and religious organizations

Agents who structure their boards to serve all the people in their counties will be more successful in identifying and programming for key issues.

Emphasis on funding streams: County Extension agents should also ensure that the board knows AgriLife Extension's mission and goals. This knowledge will help them identify the program area issues that are most important to the county.

LAB members also need to understand how Texas AgriLife Extension is funded so they can better target stakeholders who can positively influence future funding. The more familiar LAB members become with AgriLife Extension's day-to-day operations, the more successful they will be in interpreting results.

Emphasis on identifying stakeholders: Extension agents should focus on helping the LAB members identify key stakeholders within their county because their support is fundamental to Extension programming.

County Extension agents have access to many opinion leaders within the community and can foster relationships between them and the LAB members. Assisting the members in this way creates many opportunities for building networks and establishing partnerships for Extension programs.

Emphasis on outcomes and interpretation: County Extension agents should help LAB members clearly define and articulate Extension outcomes and impacts in order to "tell their story."

County Extension agents should give LAB members an interpretation piece for every annual program. This will help the LAB members advocate for the Texas AgriLife Extension Service county programs. These outcome summaries should address program relevance, response, and results.

- **Relevance:** Highlight why the program was implemented. Explain how the program meets an important county need through education.
- **Response:** Outline what the county Extension agent did to address the issue. Cite the involvement of committees, volunteers, and collaborators. In addition, outline specific topics and subject matter as well as the activities used to address the issue.

- **Results:** Discuss the evaluation strategy used to measure program impact. Provide ranked changes in participant knowledge, behavior, and economics (where appropriate). Include testimonials, images, and graphs to help explain program impact. Remember to include economic impacts when possible.

Once the LAB members know the stakeholders and are working with Extension programs, they can help agents interpret results. Interpretation will be easier for some LAB members than for others. Build the board members' confidence and reassure them that the time and effort they put into preparing and sharing results will benefit Extension. To accomplish this, set aside time to help the LAB members craft their presentations and then provide constructive feedback.

Agents play a crucial role in helping LAB members identify and prepare interpretation messages. Helping them create powerful messages can pay large dividends to county programs. A grassroots approach to telling Extension's story will improve the likelihood of continued Extension support.

Follow up with stakeholders: After an agent or LAB member has interpreted program results to stakeholders, the agent should use a note, e-mail, or phone call to thank them for their time and attention and to ask for feedback to use in future meetings. Seeking feedback demonstrates Extension's commitment to continual program improvement.

Who else can help? The Texas AgriLife Extension Service has almost 100,000 volunteers who plan, implement, and evaluate educational programs each year. These volunteers are Extension's best spokespeople. Many of them belong to program area committees, coalitions, youth boards, associations, or master volunteers groups, and they are highly regarded in their communities.

However, volunteers do not have to be board or association members to support Extension and its interpretation efforts. According to Dorian Dodson (1993), volunteers can contribute in many ways without even attending a board meeting:

- *Be a volunteer:* Becoming a volunteer in any capacity builds the grassroots support that is essential to gaining stakeholder support. Volunteers who advocate for Extension programs take pressure off

county Extension agents and demonstrate the community support stakeholders appreciate.

- *Help raise funds:* Volunteers are excellent resources for fundraising. Their community networks are an excellent way to access funds for Extension programs, and the support they provide is valued greatly.
- *Be a good spokesperson for the agency:* Advocating Extension programs in the community does not take a lot of time and effort. Once agents give LAB members the necessary tools, they can effectively represent Texas AgriLife Extension's educational programs. These volunteers are Extension's most cost-effective spokespersons.

Conclusion

Using Leadership Advisory Board members to help tell Extension's story helps build support for Extension programs. A grassroots approach to interpreting program results allows key stakeholders to see community commitment to Extension programs. To succeed in program development, Extension agents must ensure that LAB members know:

- The mission and programs of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service
- The reasons that interpreting Extension programs is important
- The importance of identifying stakeholder interests
- The agents' role in helping Leadership Advisory Boards
- The importance of having volunteers even if they are not on boards

With the proper tools, Leadership Advisory Board members can be very effective in interpreting Extension programs.

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Elected Officials Worksheet

Elected officials

| Official | County, state, federal | District | Party | Committees |
|----------|------------------------|----------|-------|------------|
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
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Date and location of elected officials' meetings

| Official | Date | Location |
|----------|------|----------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

Elected official contact information

| Official | Address | Telephone # | E-mail address | Other information |
|----------|---------|-------------|----------------|-------------------|
| | | | | |
| | | | | |

Elected official personal information

| Official | Native community info | Family info | Hobbies | Affiliations |
|----------|-----------------------|-------------|---------|--------------|
| | | | | |
| | | | | |

State and federal official information

| Official | College attended | Date first took office | Platform | Special interests |
|----------|------------------|------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| | | | | |
| | | | | |

Federal official information

| Elected official | Local office address | Washington office address | Legislative assistants |
|------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| | | | |
| | | | |

Interpreting Extension Programs Quiz

- True False 1. Providing a long-term vision for county programs is one of the six main responsibilities of a Leadership Advisory Board.
- True False 2. Texas AgriLife Extension uses over 150,000 volunteers annually.
- True False 3. Texas AgriLife Extension focuses on four main program areas: 4-H and youth development, agriculture and natural resources, community and resource development, and school policy.
- True False 4. According to Dorian Dodson, helping raise funds is an excellent way to volunteer without setting foot in a boardroom.
- True False 5. County Extension agents should focus only on recruiting people with the power to serve on their Leadership Advisory Boards.
- True False 6. According to Wholey, Abramson, and Bellavita (1986), timeliness is one of the five key elements of interpreting results to stakeholders.
- True False 7. County Extension agents should focus only on helping LAB members identify stakeholders and not helping prepare them for interpretation events.
- True False 8. Establishing networks with stakeholders is a large part of becoming an effective interpreter of programs.

1. T 2. F 3. F 4. T 5. F 6. T 7. F 8. T