

Stakeholder Input and the Statewide Program Committees

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Stakeholder Involvement and SPCs: An Expectation from the Beginning

The Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cornell Cooperative Extension first established Statewide Program Committees in the fall of 1990. The framing documents stated:

Issue-focused programming requires a variety of systemwide program development strategies. Teams of individuals representing diverse perspectives, interests, and expertise are important for shaping a statewide educational response to issues. These program committees have the responsibility for further defining and clarifying the issue(s) and developing a statewide research and extension education response. (July 1990)

From their inception, there was a clear expectation that SPC membership would be broad, including a significant representation of stakeholders. In 1995, the central purposes of the committees in guiding research and extension initiatives were reaffirmed and expanded roles in advising Federal Formula Fund allocation were initiated. At the same time, committees were given increased flexibility in structure and operations but with the continuing clear expectation that broad involvement be achieved.

The SPCs are a key mechanism for implementing the intent of the Land Grant System mission "to extend the riches of science for the benefit of all, with a special new emphasis on responsibility to the community in the form of research and extension serving public needs."¹ This plays out through the missions of the Colleges of Agriculture and Life Sciences and Human Ecology, the Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station², and Cornell Cooperative Extension.

Cornell's Opportunities and Responsibilities Relative to Federal Formula Funds

As New York State's land-grant university, Cornell has a special relationship with USDA. This partnership results in federal support passing through USDA to the Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station (CUAES) and Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE). These Federal Formula Fund (FFF) programs from USDA are known to most of us as Hatch, Regional Research, and McIntire-Stennis funds for research, and Smith-Lever funds for extension.

FFFs are an important segment of research and extension program support, in part because they provide a unique source of funds that can be locally directed. CUAES allocates about \$4 million annually to approximately 280 projects involving approximately 225 scientists.

Unlike FFF research programs, Smith-Lever allocations from USDA to CCE are not based solely on a project-by-project allocation system. However, a portion of the Smith-Lever funds used in support of CALS extension programs is allocated to projects by the directors. The remainder is allocated to departments on a formula basis. Last fiscal year CCE supported 42 projects with a total budget of approximately \$845,000. As part of CCE decision making about the projects for which Smith-Lever support is requested, proposals for them are treated identically to those for FFF research.

With regard to FFFs, CUAES and CCE directors are responsible for:

¹ Justin Morrill, ca. 1860 as reported in the KELLOGG PRESIDENTS' COMMISSION ON: THE 21ST CENTURY STATE AND LANDGRANT UNIVERSITY, January 1996.

² New York State has two agricultural experiment stations. The New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva is a separate entity from CUAES and receives Hatch funds appropriated directly from USDA. Such funds are not allocated through CUAES.

- setting overall policy and direction,
- establishing input and review procedures for projects,
- approving projects (and recommending them for authorization by USDA in the case of research), and
- allocating funds to approved projects.

The directors also are responsible for ensuring that research and extension efforts supported by CUAES and CCE meet the mandates of the FFF programs (e.g., to maintain viable agriculture, improve natural resource and environmental management, enhance quality of rural life) and, ultimately, for accountability to USDA regarding how projects are selected and approved (e.g., stakeholder input and peer review).

The CUAES and CCE directors view the FFF programs as especially important to maintaining the CALS and CHE's ability to:

- support research and extension important to New York State agricultural, environmental, and rural issues for which other federal and extramural funds are not available;
- encourage scientist and extension educator involvement in areas of existing or emerging need where external grant programs have not developed, or where preliminary effort is required to enhance competitiveness of our faculty; and
- respond with flexibility to urgent needs for research and extension as they surface.

FFFs have proved useful for all three contexts and are an important part of our overall research and extension program portfolio.

AREERA Formalizes Stakeholder Involvement Requirements

The Agricultural Research, Extension, and Education Reform Act of 1998 requires that Land Grant colleges and universities receiving agricultural research, extension or education formula funds "establish a process for receiving input from persons who conduct or use agricultural research, extension, or education on the uses of such funds." The resulting rule does not require institutions to adopt any particular format for soliciting input but requires annual reports on: (1) actions taken to encourage stakeholder input; and (2) a brief statement of the process used to identify individuals or groups as stakeholders and to collect input from them. Failure to comply may result in withholding of formula funds and redistribution of those funds to other institutions.

The bottom line is that direct, broad-based, and meaningful stakeholder input is now expected for research and extension priority setting and decision making about projects to be funded by the Experiment Station and CCE. Ensuring that such stakeholder input is occurring regularly and systematically has become a condition for the Experiment Station and CCE to receive FFF dollars.

The Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cornell Cooperative Extension have long recognized the value of broad stakeholder input. Our emphasis on effective stakeholder involvement is born out of Cornell's assessment of what is right to do, not simply a response to legislated mandates.

What We Promised SPCs Would Do In Our Current Federal Plan of Work

Our current (FY00-05) Federal Plan of Work for research and extension required us to articulate our stakeholder involvement mechanisms, including roles for SPCs. These are the roles outlined for SPCs:

1. SPCs annually identify priority areas for applied research and extension program attention. The directors inform the faculty of these priorities in the call for pre-proposals issued annually, and use these when making resource allocation decisions, especially the federal formula funds for research (e.g., Hatch) and extension (i.e., Smith-Lever).
2. SPCs are asked to review the majority of all research and extension project/program pre-proposals requesting federal formula fund support. This review is for "relevancy" and "potential for significant impact."

3. The Directors of Research and Extension jointly fund a Research/Extension Integration Grants program that requires attention to SPC-identified priorities, requires local extension association involvement, requires integration of research and extension, and expects multi-disciplinary effort. These are reviewed and rated by the appropriate SPCs.

What are the Current Expectations for Stakeholder Involvement in SPCs?

Current guidelines are intentionally broad to accommodate the very different nature of issues addressed across committees. Committees are expected to:

- Bring together multiple disciplines required for a comprehensive approach
- Address a range of audiences: individuals, families, businesses, communities, agencies, NGOs, industries, and policy makers.
- Effectively engage research and extension faculty and staff on and off campus

The bottom line expectation is that a stakeholder input process relevant to the work of the SPC must be articulated and defensible relative to the scope of work of the committee. The following sections are intended to assist with analyzing stakeholder involvement needs and opportunities as a basis for defining an input process.

Stakeholder Involvement as a Process

The most obvious mechanism for stakeholder involvement is "at the table" representation. Such involvement is strongly encouraged but is not adequate. To make the point, consider a committee defined by a commodity. The range of potential industry sectors, related agriservice and food system interests, relevant policy makers and regulatory interests, plus consumer interests makes it clear that relying solely on direct representation to gain program guidance would be severely limiting.

Because SPCs are, by their very nature, a convergence of broad interests, there must be mechanisms beyond direct membership to engage a broad range of stakeholders. Methods might include:

- Systematically accessing a network of contacts
- Active data gathering and survey work including tapping into the Cornell Cooperative Extension plan of work process
- Accessing electronic and written sources
- Sponsoring involvement/planning events
- Effectively linking to CCE, CALS, CHE advisory bodies

Stakeholder involvement also requires bi-directional communication, not just one-way data gathering.

Self-Assessment Questions

Step 1: Inventory

What "sectors" are or should be encompassed by the work of our SPC (individuals, families, businesses, communities, industries, agencies, policy makers, other interest groups)?

Step 2: Involvement Mechanisms

What sectors are (or might be) directly represented?

What sectors are indirectly represented through identifiable relationships and contacts?

What data sources do we currently use?

What additional data sources might we use?

How does our committee relate to the advisory structures of the colleges and CCE? How might those links be strengthened?

How well does our committee draw from the plans of work of CCE and departments, centers and institutes? How might those links be strengthened?

What networks do we currently tap into for input?

What additional networks might be tapped?

What activities or events (such as a planning conference) might be used to supplement existing stakeholder input?

Step 3: Overall Assessment

What are the different emphases (content, themes, etc.) of the work of this SPC? How well do current stakeholder input mechanisms inform each aspect?

Step 4: Communication Plan

What mechanisms will we use to promote two-way communication with stakeholders?

How will we document and communicate our involvement plans?