

Identifying, Selecting and Recruiting Members

To identify, select, and recruit the right county leaders to make up the County Extension Council is of primary importance to the success of the Council. Although the county Extension faculty can (and should) identify many leaders who would be good representatives on the Council, selecting the right “mix” will be critical to continued success. Selecting the 9 to 12 people for this important role will not be an easy task and should be shared by all members of the county Extension faculty.

The county staff chair is responsible for making sure that a viable County Extension Council exists. However, it is critical that all faculty are involved in the identification, selection, recruitment, and training process. Although all faculty will immediately identify some potential members, each is likely to think of other potential members not readily identified by the group.

A first step in selecting new Council members should be an open brainstorming session involving all county Extension faculty. Remember, in brainstorming the purpose is to generate as many names as possible. Each name would be accepted with no discussion of merit or without being evaluated in the process.

Next, establish criteria to be used to select the **right** Council members. Here are some considerations.

Identify Stakeholder Groups

Most County Extension Council members should be stakeholders in the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service and its educational program

in your county. Simply said, a stakeholder is a person who has a “stake” in how the program comes out. A stakeholder is a person inside or outside the organization who has:

- A real active interest in the organization
- An investment in the organization (time, money, mental/emotional energy)
- A commitment to the organization’s success

Who are the people who have a real stake in county Extension programs? Here are some suggestions:

- People who use Extension programs or who have shown an interest in, or who have influence in, specific issues
- Agricultural interests – producers, ranchers, farmers, agribusiness persons, farm and commodity organizations
- Family oriented interests – individuals, adults and youth, family members
- Civic groups – representatives of organizations, leaders who serve the business or financial community, chamber of commerce, etc.
- Government – county officials, quorum court members, mayors, legislators
- Occupational and professional interests – health, education, legal, industry and banking, spiritual/religious group leaders, related agencies, and media representatives

Select Leaders From These Groups

Selecting the right individuals from each of the stakeholder groups is the next challenge. One way to do this is to determine the leadership structure of the group. There are several ways to identify leaders.

1. **Positional approach** – Many times leadership is assumed to rest in the top leadership position (offices) in formal organizations. The positional approach is straightforward and takes little time or money, as long as you know which organizations you want to include and the list is not too long. The approach has two possible limitations. The positional leader may be little more than a “figurehead,” which can often be determined only through experience. Also, the approach is limited to positional leaders in formal organizations. It does not help in identifying non-formal leaders and others who do not hold formal leadership positions.

2. **Reputational approach** – This approach involves interviewing people with influence in a targeted group. Such persons are asked to name those in the community whom they consider general or “visible” leaders. Often it may simply involve asking such questions as, “Who gets things done around here?” or “Name the people who are most important in this community.”

3. **Decision making approach** – This approach identifies leaders who are active and involved in community issues; analysis of several of the decisions in which these persons were involved may help establish the extent of their leadership.

4. **Social participation approach** – Leadership is assumed to be acquired through membership and by holding office in voluntary organizations.

Don’t forget to include:

5. **Emerging leaders** – The assumption is that these are the community’s leaders in the years ahead and involving them gradually in

programming responsibilities will enhance the quality of their leadership for later roles. Four sources of emerging leadership should be considered: (a) organizational hierarchies; (b) customers, clients, and members of organizations; (c) issue or special subject matter people and (d) people who have a special ability to work with groups.

6. **Minority leadership** – Careful attention should be given to identifying and working with minority leadership, including racial-ethnic groups and women.

Consider Personal Qualifications of Members

Not only is it important to get the right “mix” of members according to the audiences they represent, but it is also important to select members with the right personal qualifications. **First**, members should be known as leaders by the way they think and act. Members should be knowledgeable, visionary and deeply committed to improving the way of life of the people in their county. They should be respected in their community for being positively involved in solving problems. **Second**, members should have qualities that enable them to function well in a working group. They should have demonstrated ability to think objectively about interests not directly represented on the Council. Such people serve to incorporate the wisdom and experience of others with their own. Other important qualities include:

- Demonstrated leadership and active community participation.
- Demonstrated ability to work harmoniously with others.
- Demonstrated ability to be articulate without being overbearing.
- Capacity to influence constructive public opinion.
- Command respect from their peers.
- Willingness to devote a reasonable amount of time and effort to the Council’s work for a specified term of office.

- Acceptance of membership after knowing the purposes of program development and functions of the Council.

Affirmative Action Considerations

Representation on the Council (or its committees) should reflect appropriate geographic, organizational, and population diversity to ensure active participation from all areas of interest. Reflection of population diversity should consider gender, age, racial-ethnic population segments, and socioeconomic levels. All appointments should meet the Affirmative Action guidelines.

Other Membership Considerations

The County Extension Council may include people who are not familiar with Extension as well as those who are. Some of your council members may be people who have never participated in any Extension function. **The goal here is to select a group of strong leaders who will become strong Extension supporters.**

It is important to remember that a person brings more than one characteristic to the Council. The key common element to look for when selecting specific individuals is a sincere desire to help solve local problems and improve the economic, physical, and social well-being of all county residents. For example, imagine a potential member who is white and female; a member of a young family with children involved in the 4-H program; involved in the operation of the family business with a dairy, an agricultural enterprise; and a user of Extension programs and services through the agriculture and 4-H programs. In this case, the person brings multiple interests to the Council, and it is expected that all members will.

Attention should be given first to selecting the 9 to 12 County Extension Council members. It is through this group that areas of program emphasis will be identified and appropriate program committees appointed. The long list of names generated through the initial brainstorming session will be useful later when program committees are appointed. If the right mix of people is appointed to the Council **first**, finding the right chair for the appropriate program committees should not be a problem.

In analyzing the skills and characteristics of the Council, you may find it helpful to chart out the individual members' characteristics against those you would like to see represented on the council. By examining the chart, it is possible to identify characteristics that may be missing from the council as well as areas in which it is overweighed. A sample chart is included. (*See Section 2, Example 1: Example Membership Grid with Sample Classifications.*)

A choice of method(s) of selection for overall council membership should be based on the particular structure of the county. Just to identify a majority of membership from the power structure, in some cases, may in the long run prove detrimental to Extension programming. Consider the total program and potential audiences for program thrusts. Select individuals based on the relevancy of their roles and positions to the scope of Extension programs.

Caution: The county judge is to nominate one-third of the membership (3 to 4 members). It is important to work closely with him/her to make sure these members not only are acceptable to him but also fit the Affirmative Action guidelines and the overall makeup of the Council. Many times the judge will ask, "Who would you suggest?" You may want to develop a list of several potential candidates for membership before visiting with the judge. You could then suggest appropriate names for his/her consideration.

Recruiting Members

Once potential members have been identified and selected using the above criteria, the next important step is asking these people to serve and getting a positive response.

A personal contact should be made when asking people to serve, followed by a letter outlining responsibilities. Tell council members what is expected of them **before** you ask them to serve. Make sure they understand expectations before they agree to serve. Choose the right Extension faculty member to make the contact, and do it at the most opportune time.

Here are some pointers about talking to someone about committee membership:

- Begin the conversation with a few questions about the prospect's family and community. Ask about individual and community needs and concerns, especially in the prospect's special area of interest.
- Discuss Extension's role and how the County Extension Council helps to carry it out.
- Sell the results that Extension programs help to accomplish – help the person to see the benefits, not just the programs, that can occur.
- Be positive and personal. Be honest about the amount of time that will be required for service and the kinds of things that the Council will be involved in doing.
- Stress why this particular person is qualified for membership.
- Consider taking along printed materials to show and leave with the prospective member.

- Sometimes it's advisable not to ask for a "yes or no" answer during the first contact. A follow-up contact may be desirable for some.
- If a follow-up contact is planned, arrange to be back in touch within a few days to get an answer. Then do the follow-up contact as indicated.
- Once a positive response is received, immediately send a letter affirming acceptance and outlining responsibilities. (*See Section 4, Example 1: Letter to a New Member.*)

Introduction to Membership

After new members have made a commitment to serve, two critical objectives – orientation and involvement – should be achieved:

- A thorough explanation of the role and functions of the Council, including individual member responsibilities.
- Involvement of the new members in the work of the Council.

Remember, what you see is what you get! No matter how carefully members are selected, they bring to a committee all their imperfections, peculiarities and limitations, as well as their strong points. You can't recruit just the fine points about a person – you take all of them. But you can assure that each has the best possible chance to be a successful, effective member.

Selecting Program Committee Members

Once the County Extension Council has met and identified key issues to be included in the County Extension Program, appropriate program/issue committees should be appointed

to develop specific program thrusts and plans. Two persons from the County Extension Council should serve as chair and vice chair of each of these committees. (*See Section 2: Chair and Vice Chair Responsibilities.*) Additional committee members as needed for each committee would then be appointed from outside the Council membership. Each committee can be as large as necessary to function effectively.

The same general guidelines outlined here apply to selecting the right committee members for each program committee. These committees should also be representative of the population they represent. Involving all appropriate faculty in consultation with named chair and vice chair would also be advisable.