

Extension Advisory Committees: An Introduction

A strong, well-constructed, and well-managed advisory committee can be a tremendous asset to your programming and outreach efforts as an Extension agent. However, starting and maintaining one often takes a back seat to the day-to-day operational needs of the job. This publication offers an overview of the benefits of an advisory committee and outlines steps to make your committee work for you and your Extension programming efforts.

Why Do You Need an Advisory Committee?

Mississippi State University Extension's mission is to serve the needs of the people through science-based information that will ultimately increase knowledge, improve practices, and change lives. For this mission to be accomplished, you must first determine:

- Who are your stakeholders ("the people")?
- What are their needs?
- Which representatives of the identified stakeholder group(s) would best contribute to the successful function of your advisory committee?

An advisory committee differs from a working group or task force in that it is intended to be permanent and should provide ongoing support. Within county Extension offices, there are often two types of advisory committees.

An overall advisory committee—sometimes called an advisory council—is managed by the county coordinator and provides guidance and support for the overarching issues and activities of an entire county Extension office.

The second type of advisory committee is program specific—Ag & Natural Resources (ANR), Community Resource Development (CRD), Family & Consumer Sciences (FCS), or 4-H Youth Development (4-H)—and is managed by an individual Extension agent. Often, at least one member from each program area-specific advisory committee also serves on the overall advisory committee.

These advisory committees, whether overall or program area specific, serve several functions that could benefit Extension. Here are some examples:

- Offer a forum for program stakeholders to communicate their opinions, share their expertise, and help coordinate services.
- Provide a link between Extension program area operations and the overall advisory committee through a member serving on both groups.
- Support and represent/advocate for the interests of the Extension program or organization to community leaders, policymakers, and key decision-makers.

Steps for Developing an Effective Advisory Committee

1. Establish the purpose of the advisory committee.

Before you can start to build the membership of your advisory committee, you first need to clarify its purpose and scope. For example, an advisory committee whose priority is to increase partnership collaboration and communication will likely have different membership than one whose primary purpose is to organize activities or raise funds. Remember that your advisory committee is meant to guide and challenge you, as an Extension professional, to think outside the box, take calculated risks, reach underserved and nontraditional audiences, and generally help you make your programming better.

When working on this step, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I want an advisory committee that can advocate for my program and increase its visibility, both internally and externally?
- Do I want a working committee that can take on specific tasks to support my Extension activities, or do I want an advisory group that can provide informed input as I plan new activities or develop policies and procedures?
- Do I need the advisory committee as a structure for keeping partners engaged and community members informed, or would it be most helpful to have a small

group of people with specific skills and connections that can help me get things done?

The nature of Extension is such that, in most cases, a well-oiled, effective advisory committee will need to do all of the things listed above. Recognize, then, that this will be a tall order for anyone who volunteers to serve on such a committee, and it will be up to you to pick the right people, keep them well-informed and regularly engaged, and demonstrate your appreciation through some form of incentive or recognition of their efforts.

A final consideration when establishing the purpose of your advisory committee is determining what decisions this group can make. Will someone higher up in the chain of command need to approve any actions the committee wants to take?

2. Recruit members that fit with the committee's purpose.

In the beginning, it will be natural to turn first to people you already know or those who have already expressed interest in being involved. While this base of supporters is a good start, you should think strategically about who you want to serve on your committee and the skills they will need to provide the greatest benefit to the committee's purpose as well as your programming and operational efforts. Make efforts to recruit members who have differing views from your own, are known to be creative or imaginative (big-picture types), and may challenge you to think critically. Additionally, consider recruiting a few members who have not traditionally been clients of Extension programming in your county but may represent a potentially underserved group that could benefit from Extension's services.

Examples of potential members include:

- current or former Extension agents
- current or former volunteers
- representatives of partner organizations
- representatives from key community-based organizations that serve your target audience(s), including parents of 4-H'ers
- representatives from your community's cultural, racial, and ethnic minorities

Other criteria for membership may include a diversity of opinions and experience and a balance of cultural, racial, age, and gender representation.

The skills you look for as you build your committee depend on its purpose.

- If it is primarily to raise funds to support your Extension program, seek out members with grant writing, event management, business, or marketing skills.
- If you need members to articulate and advocate for your mission, skills in public speaking or journalism might be helpful.
- If you need help with program policy and procedures, skills in management and attention to detail will be important.
- In addition, all members should be able to communicate well, listen and learn, and provide constructive advice.
- Finally, they should be enthusiastic about Extension and have a genuine interest in helping you with your mission.

As you recruit members, ask for suggestions from other agents, your regional Extension coordinator, partner agencies, and others. Ask potential members to complete a simple written application that gathers basic information about their skills, interests, and motivations. This will help you track the mix of skills and representation that will be most effective. Once your group is established, have participants determine policies and procedures for recruiting and selecting new members.

3. Develop structure and clarify expectations.

It is important to help your advisory committee members develop as a team and establish a strong sense of ownership in the process from the very beginning. Your first meeting likely will be devoted to getting members acquainted with you and each other and learning about MSU Extension and your current programming efforts in the county.

If this is a brand new committee, a necessary task to immediately follow the introductions will be the development of the committee's basic operating procedures. This includes items such as these:

- whether there will be officers
- how often the committee will meet
- meeting structure and guidelines
- term(s) of service

Even if some of these have been set up in advance and you're re-establishing a formerly established advisory committee, the members should review the procedures and suggest improvements.

Once members have established some basic operating guidelines, continue to engage them by starting discussions about the work they were recruited to do. Before determining exactly what that work should be, they need to understand what your program is all about and what their mission and level of involvement will be.

- Orient members to your Extension programming efforts. Describe long-term goals and objectives and current activities. Include information about the current audience(s) you serve, partnerships, past or current struggles or barriers to success, and other program basics. The goal is to provide enough information that committee members will understand what you do and how things work. Then, they can offer suggestions that make sense. Provide information in writing for members to review and refer to later.
- Review the advisory committee's mission. If committee members were not involved in creating the mission, they should review it and see if it reflects why they are there. It should be something they all feel reflects what they want to be. Let them know in advance if there are any requirements dictated by Extension administration, your funding source, or other entities that may limit changing the mission.
- Clarify the committee's expectations and limits of authority. Your advisory committee should be there to make recommendations, give opinions, and offer assistance, but it really has no true decision-making authority. Ensure that members know what decisions they can make on their own, how their advice will be used, and how final decisions will be made. Develop a communication link between the county coordinator, overall advisory council, and your program area-specific advisory committee so that your committee members see that their work is recognized and taken seriously.

4. Empower the committee to develop a clear plan of work.

Advisory committee members may request direction on what their specific role(s) should be and what activities they will be involved with, but for them to be fully invested, they need to develop their own plan

of work based on the information you provide. It is strongly recommended that you walk them through a planning process.

First, facilitate a conversation with committee members about which aspects of your program would benefit from their support. Examples might include volunteer recruitment and training, fundraising, or community awareness.

Second, conduct a needs assessment. Discuss which of the identified aspects need support right away and what level of support is needed. Ask the committee to select one or two items or actions for short-term goals and at least one or two more for long-term goals. This step of allowing committee members to establish these priorities will help ensure their commitment and support of your efforts moving forward. However, make sure the priorities they set are realistic and fill a real program need.

Next, help the committee establish measurable objectives and specific activities for the chosen priorities. For example, if expanding your volunteer base was identified as a top priority, the committee might establish an objective of increasing the number of business or community leaders who choose to volunteer. Then, to accomplish this objective, the committee members each agree to contact a certain number of business or community leaders over the next 3 months and report on the results at the next meeting.

Finally, identify a lead person for each area of involvement the committee plans to take on so program staff don't have to do all the work of encouraging people to follow through on agreed-upon tasks.

Ultimately, the purpose of an Extension advisory committee is to make your job as an agent easier and more focused. With proper planning and preparation on your part as to the purpose of the committee, recruitment and orientation of relevant members, and establishment of clear and appropriate guidelines and expectations, your advisory committee can serve you well.

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