

Extension Leadership Councils: Planning for Success

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Abstract

An Extension Leadership Council (ELC) is a key ingredient for success in developing, implementing, and evaluating Extension programs that serve the local community. This publication offers practical guidelines and resources for successfully engaging a local ELC. Contents include council responsibilities, criteria for membership, a sample position description, focus topics for regular meetings, and a template for meeting agendas.

Understanding the Role of ELCs

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) enables people to improve their lives through an educational process that uses scientific knowledge focused on issues and needs.¹ This mission cannot be fulfilled without connections and relationships within local communities. VCE's most valuable connections to local communities are representative groups known as Extension Leadership Councils. Although each local ELC may take a unique approach to its form and overall structure, all local ELCs have a common mission: *to advance and promote Virginia Cooperative Extension's programs and presence in the local community*. The ELCs' primary areas of focus include relationship building, Extension advocacy, and program advisement and support. ELC involvement in these activities ensures that Extension's efforts remain relevant to the community.

Relationship Building

ELCs are a valuable resource for connecting Extension agents and programs with stakeholders and organizations throughout the local community. Even when agents are long-time residents, their personal relationships and connections may not include all demographic groups within

the community. While the local ELC is representative of the overall community, each ELC member serves as a key connection with a subgroup of that community. Without this connection, the involvement and support for local Extension programs would be limited to the communication networks already established by local agents, making local ELCs particularly important for agents who are new to a community. The local ELC can play a key role in getting community leaders and key stakeholders "on board" by introducing them to agents.

Extension Advocacy

The relationships held by ELC members are essential for marketing Extension and advocating for the resources needed to sustain and improve Extension programs. Extension agents are certainly important proponents of Extension programming. However, an agent's role as an employee presents a potential bias that may be difficult for some potential supporters to overlook. In fact, VCE employees are prohibited from engaging in political activities that create a conflict of interest.² For this reason, volunteer members of ELCs are better suited for advocacy. While this advocacy can focus on local gifts and grants, the vast majority of Extension resources are from citizens' tax dollars (local, state, and federal). Accordingly, ELC members often have the greatest impact through their relationships with elected officials.³ ELC members can be reliable sources of information relative to community needs and what Extension is doing to address them.

Program Support and Advisement

The VCE programming process includes: situation analysis, program design and implementation, and program evaluation and reporting. This approach to education relies on the collective efforts of Extension educators,

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ELCs, and other program volunteers. The VCE Programming Model places stakeholders at the center of the entire process, and ELCs provide the means for ensuring stakeholder involvement.⁴ The representative nature of ELCs makes them ideal for facilitating community input, soliciting volunteer involvement, and guiding program improvement.

Developing the ELC Membership

The local ELC is a true collaboration between Extension employees and volunteers. While agents bring subject-matter expertise, the volunteer members keep Extension programming focused on the purpose and context – serving the needs of the local community.⁵ As we consider the tasks necessary for developing a strong ELC membership, it may be helpful to consider the GEMS Model of Volunteer Administration.⁶ The model includes four broad stages of development: Generate, Educate, Mobilize, and Sustain.

Generate

When generating membership in the local ELC, we should focus on two key characteristics of a successful ELC: it is representative of the community and committed to the mission of VCE. The ELC should reflect the people and interests of the local community.⁷ In order to ensure that ELC membership represents the diversity within the local community, it may be helpful to develop a community profile and then identify targets for membership from different community groups. A previously completed situation analysis for the Extension unit may serve as a guide.⁸ Appendix A: Extension Leadership Council Candidate Worksheet may be helpful in the selection process. The task of generating commitment begins with the invitations to individual board members. Some ELCs find that term limits can help improve commitment because term limits reassure council nominees that they are not volunteering for a lifetime commitment.

Educate

Volunteer ELC members should participate in an orientation on Extension – its role, mission, and programs.⁹ All ELC members should receive a position description that describes their role within the ELC, including specific expectations for participation and involvement. An example position description and statement of commitment is provided in Appendix B: Extension Leadership Council Member Sample Position Description

and Commitment. Beyond orientation, ELC members commit to continued education and professional development. One way to accomplish this is by regularly setting aside meeting time for informative presentations and professional development.

Mobilize

The best way to mobilize ELC members is to empower them for action. This can be done by developing an action plan for the year, taking into consideration the ELC's role in the Extension programming process.¹⁰ Many local ELCs have found it helpful to select an annual event that the council is fully involved in planning and implementing. Examples include a community education event, legislative breakfast, volunteer recognition banquet, etc. When ELC members take ownership of these events, they often feel more engaged than when their involvement is limited to voting and discussion at meetings.

Sustain

Sustaining high-quality involvement in the local ELC requires regular evaluation and recognition. Appendix C: The ELC Responsibility Report worksheet may be helpful in the process. When ELC members complete this worksheet annually, it reminds them of the purpose and role of an ELC. Beyond this tool, many ELCs find it helpful to adopt bylaws that outline clear expectations for the council. The bylaws might set term limits on ELC membership, which in turn promotes sustainability through the fresh ideas and energy offered by new ELC members.

Organizing the Plan

The structure for ELC activities and involvement generally comes from regular meetings. For this reason, purpose-driven meeting agendas are often a key to success. An example of a structured meeting agenda worksheet is offered in Appendix D: Template for a Purpose-Driven Agenda. When distributed in advance of the meeting, the agenda helps participants prepare for and stay focused on the topics at hand. ELCs that meet quarterly might identify the following focus topics and guiding questions for each meeting:

1. Community Needs Assessment
 - a. How has our community changed in the past year or two?

- b. Which community needs relate most to Extension's mission and program areas?
2. Program Review and Planning
 - a. Which Extension programs relate most to current community needs?
 - b. How can Extension programs be improved or restructured to better meet community needs?
 3. Program Promotion
 - a. Which stakeholders and policy makers need to know more about Extension's programs and efforts?
 - b. How can we better advertise and promote Extension's programs?
 4. Recognition
 - a. Which programs, staff members, and volunteers deserve extra recognition for recent accomplishments?
 - b. How can we better recognize and support these individuals and programs in our local community and beyond?

The questions presented with each focus topic may be difficult to answer in a single meeting, especially if ELC members are not prepared for the discussion. Some professional development and work between meetings may be required. However, volunteers often appreciate these added expectations because it makes them feel valued and more engaged in the process.

ELC coordinators have a variety of resources available to assist with programming. Helpful online resources include:

- New Pathways to Planning: <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/pathway/>
- Strengthening Extension Advisory Leaders: <http://srpln.msstate.edu/seal/>
- The Community Tool Box: <http://ctb.ku.edu/tools/>

Please take advantage of these resources and share your findings with others!

Tip: Suggested Timeline

Based on the VCE Programming Cycle Timeline, the best months for holding each meeting may be as follows:

1. Community Needs Assessment	August
2. Program Review and Planning	November
3. Program Promotion	February
4. Recognition	May

Notes

1. The mission, vision, and history of VCE are published at www.ext.vt.edu/about/mission.html.
2. VCE policies and procedures are posted at <http://intra.ext.vt.edu/policies/index2.html>.
3. An advocacy guide for ELCs is available at <http://intra.ext.vt.edu/support/leadershipcouncil/documents/VCELCadvocacyguide08.pdf>.
4. Programming resources for VCE are posted at <http://intra.ext.vt.edu/support/index.html>.
5. Volunteer development resources for VCE are posted at <http://intra.ext.vt.edu/support/volunteer/>.
6. For additional information on the GEMS Model of Volunteer Administration, go to <http://extension.psu.edu/advisoryleadershipgems/> or www.ca.uky.edu/agcollege/4h/oldsite/gems/INDEX.HTM.
7. Demographic profile worksheets are available at www.southern.org/pubs/pubs_pdfs/2003rfs_guide.pdf and <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/pathway/profile.html>. The latest demographics for your area can be obtained from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/>.
8. Instructions for conducting a VCE situation analysis are posted at <http://intra.ext.vt.edu/support/process/situation.html>.
9. A new member checklist for ELCs is posted at <http://intra.ext.vt.edu/support/leadershipcouncil/local/checklist.doc>.
10. An action plan can be simple, using the template posted at http://intra.ext.vt.edu/support/leadershipcouncil/local/elc_1.html#plansofaction. A more detailed action plan may follow guidelines proposed at www.acphd.org/AXBYCZ/Admin/DataReports/12_step8_actionplan.pdf.

Appendix A: Extension Leadership Council Candidate Worksheet

This worksheet will help the nominating committee evaluate potential ELC members.

Name of candidate: _____

Geographic region represented: _____

Primary community interest represented: _____

Questions	Yes	No	Unsure
Does the candidate believe in the mission and vision of Extension?	___	___	___
Does the candidate see the community in a broad perspective?	___	___	___
Is the candidate a long-time community resident (at least five years)?	___	___	___
Is the candidate interested in multiple areas of Extension education?	___	___	___
Is the candidate considered a leader in the community?	___	___	___
Is the candidate a good fit for the Extension Leadership Council?	___	___	___

What strengths do you think the candidate can bring to the Extension Leadership Council?

Other comments about the candidate:

Appendix B: Extension Leadership Council Member Sample Position Description and Commitment

The purpose of the Extension Leadership Council is to advance and promote Virginia Cooperative Extension's programs and presence in the local community. Benefits of serving on the council include:

- Play a significant part in the educational process.
- See the impact Extension has in the community.
- Witness positive changes in Extension program participants.
- Experience personal growth from participating in this vital community effort.

As a member, I will serve a term of two years and be involved in the following functions:

- **Relationship building:** Connecting Extension agents and programs with stakeholders and organizations throughout the local community.
- **Extension advocacy:** Marketing Extension and advocating for the necessary resources to sustain and improve Extension programs.
- **Program support and advisement:** Participating in the VCE programming process, including situation analysis, program design and implementation, and program evaluation and reporting.

In addition, I am willing to (check all that apply to you):

- Attend meetings regularly.
- Provide oral and written reports on progress toward goals in program areas I represent.
- Deliver presentations on behalf of Extension at community group meetings.
- Serve as a volunteer for a major educational program.
- Provide leadership for a major educational program.
- Organize a community group to explore solutions for community issues.
- Write reports, publicity releases, meeting notices, etc.
- Assist in securing resources for Extension programs.
- Teach technical subject matter (list program area): _____
- Recruit volunteers (list program area): _____
- Other: _____

In order to do the above, I will need the following:

Signature of person making nomination

Signature of nominee

Date: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C: Extension Leadership Council Responsibility Report

The Extension Leadership Council should complete this self-assessment annually to ensure that it is meeting its responsibilities.

Report date: _____

Total number of ELC members: _____

Total number of ELC meetings held during the past 12 months: _____

Average number of ELC members attending each meeting: _____

Responsibility	Level of Performance (1 = low; 5 = high)	Explanation of Rating
Relationship building: Connect Extension agents and programs with stakeholders and organizations throughout the local community	1 2 3 4 5	
Extension advocacy: Market Extension and advocate for the necessary resources to sustain and improve Extension programs	1 2 3 4 5	
Program support and advisement: Participate in the VCE programming process, including situation analysis, program design and implementation, and program evaluation and reporting	1 2 3 4 5	
Other:	1 2 3 4 5	
Other:	1 2 3 4 5	

Note: The ELC chair or unit coordinator may summarize yearly accomplishments on a separate sheet.

Appendix D: Template for a Purpose-Driven Agenda

Use this worksheet to prepare agendas that will ensure meeting objectives are met.

Date of meeting: _____

Start and end time of meeting: _____

Location of meeting: _____

What to bring: _____

Focus topic: _____

Guiding questions:

- _____
- _____

What we need to accomplish:

Agenda

1. Call to order
2. Introduction of members and guests
3. Approval of minutes from previous meeting
4. Announcements
5. Reports and/or professional development activity
6. Unfinished business (if any)
 - a. _____
7. Discussion and response to guiding questions (above)
8. New business
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
9. Adjournment

Note: The agenda can be further enhanced by assigning a time and person responsible for each agenda item.