



Extension Leadership Councils: Planning for Success

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Summary

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. It is intended as a resource for both volunteers and Extension personnel.

Understanding the Role of ELCs

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) builds local relationships and collaborative partnerships, helping people put scientific knowledge to work through learning experiences that improve economic, environmental, and social well-being.¹ VCE's most valuable connections to local communities are in the form of representative groups known as Extension Leadership Councils (ELCs).² Although each local ELC may take unique approach to 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 do not have any supervisory authority or responsibility; instead, their primary areas of work include relationship building, Extension advocacy, and program advisement and support. ELC involvement in these activities ensures 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 have been long-standing residents of the community, their personal relationships

and connections may not include all demographic groups within the community. When the local ELC is representative of the overall community, each ELC member serves as a key connection with a sub-group of that community. Accordingly, it is important that ELCs maintain a diverse membership (geographic, demographic, socio-economic, etc.). Without such connections, the involvement and support for local Extension programs will be limited to the communication networks of the local agents, which makes local ELCs particularly important for agents who are new to the community. The local ELC can play a key role in the "on-boarding" process by introducing agents to community leaders and key stakeholders.

Extension Advocacy

The relationships held by the ELC members are essential for marketing Extension and advocating for the necessary resources to sustain and improve Extension programs. Extension agents are certainly important proponents of Extension programming. However, their 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.³ For this reason, the 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 citizen tax dollars (local, state, and federal). Accordingly, ELC members may have the greatest impact through relationships with elected officials. ELC members can be a reliable source 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, educational program design and implementation, and program evaluation and reporting.⁴ This approach to education relies on the collective efforts of Extension educators, 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.⁵ 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.⁶ As we consider the tasks necessary for developing a strong ELC membership, it may be helpful to consider the GEMS Model of Volunteer Administration.⁷ 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: representative and committed. The ELC should reflect the people and interests of the local community.⁸ In order to ensure the ELC membership represents the diversity within the local community, it may be helpful to develop a profile of the community and then identify targets for membership from different community groups. A previously completed situation analysis for the Extension unit may serve as a guide.⁹ The candidate worksheet in Appendix A may be helpful in the selection process. The task of generating commitment begins with the invitations to individual board members. Some ELCs find term limits can help improve commitment, because the term limits reassure council nominees they are not committing to a life sentence.

Educate

Volunteer ELC members should participate in an orientation to Extension – its role, mission, and programs. 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. Beyond orientation, ELC members commit to continued education and professional development. One way to accomplish this is by regularly committing 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 for which the council is fully involved in the planning and implementation. Examples include a community education event, a legislative breakfast, a volunteer recognition banquet, etc. When ELC members take ownership of these events, they often feel much more engaged than when involvement is limited to voting and discussion at meetings.

Sustain

Sustaining high-quality involvement in the local ELC requires regular evaluation and recognition. The ELC Responsibility Worksheet, provided in Appendix C, 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 by-laws that outline clear expectations for the council. The by-laws might set term limits on ELC membership, which in turn promotes sustainability through fresh ideas and energy from 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. When distributed in advance of the meeting, the agenda helps meeting participants to come prepared 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:

- Strengthening Extension Advisory Leaders, <https://campus.extension.org/course/view.php?id=595>.
- The Community Tool Box, <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/toolkits>.
- Fact Sheets on Building Coalitions, <https://ohioline.osu.edu/tags/building-coalitions>.

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

Tips for Using this with your ELC:

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 & 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. The importance of local ELCs was emphasized in the Virginia Secretary of Education’s (2011) analysis of Virginia Cooperative Extension, available at https://ext.vt.edu/content/dam/ext_vt_edu/about/sec-ed-report/vsoe-report-complete.pdf.
3. VCE policies and procedures are posted at <https://sites.google.com/view/extintranet/guidelines-and-policies>.
4. An overview of the VCE programming process is available at <https://sites.google.com/view/extintranet/program-support/programming-process>.
5. Programming resources for VCE are posted at <https://sites.google.com/view/extintranet/program-support>.
6. The volunteer development resources for VCE are posted at <https://sites.google.com/view/extintranet/program-support/volunteer-development>.
7. For additional information on the GEMS Model of Volunteer Administration, go to <https://doi.org/10.34068/joe.50.06.28>
8. The latest demographics for your area can be obtained from the American Community Survey, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/> or the Virginia Department of Health Data Commons, https://uva-bi-sdad.github.io/vdh_rural_health_site/?metric_set=unit_profiles.
9. Instructions for conducting a VCE Situation Analysis are posted at <https://sites.google.com/view/extintranet/program-support/situation-analysis-needs-assessments>. Additional guidance on conducting a community assessment is available at <https://ohioline.osu.edu/factsheet/CDFS-7>.
10. The action plan may be simple, using the resources posted at <https://sites.google.com/view/extintranet/program-support>.

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