

Engaging Extension Audiences on Controversial Public Issues

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Issues that influence people's lives are often controversial in nature

- obesity
- teen pregnancy
- the opioid epidemic
- mental health
- personal debt



Conducting educational programs on these topics can put Extension educators in a position where they feel uncomfortable

There is a fear of being labeled as “biased”

Or being criticized for “crossing the line”

Education versus advocacy – is there a line?

If so, where is it drawn, and who draws it?

We can take some of the guesswork out of these problems if we have a framework for categorizing controversial public issues

- The first step is to identify whether the public issue has a direct link to an underlying problem
- An approach to deal with education on a topic like this is to determine the clarity of the underlying problem
- Let's look at a framework



A typology of public issues

	Type I	Type II	Type III
Underlying Problem	Clear	Clear	Unclear
Solution to Problem	Clear	Several alternatives	To be discovered
Examples	Potholes in streets	Inadequate school funding	Urban sprawl



Let's think of some Type I, II and III issues that FCS educators and specialists face

- How easy is it to identify the underlying problem associated with a public issue?
- What about measuring the clarity of the problem?



Now let's look at potential roles for government and the general public using our framework – they are the bulk of our clientele

	Type I	Type II	Type III
Government officials	Implement solution	Publicize alternative solutions	Encourage public discussion
The public	None	Consider proposed solutions	Increase understanding of the issue - Consider approaches



Again let's do some examples on issues in FCS

Some from your own experience

Others you have heard about

Hypothetical ones that might appear in the future



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Now let's look at Extension's roles

	Type I	Type II	Type III
Content Expert	Provide information.	Analyze proposed solutions	Conduct issue research & analysis
Process Experts	None	Facilitate public deliberation	Frame the issue in public terms - Facilitate public deliberation



Content expert roles (focus on research and teaching)

- Issue monitor – identify emerging public issues
- Issue researcher – conduct applied research, including public opinion polls
- Information provider – teaching of actual content related to issue/problem



Content expert roles

(Continued)

- Technical advisor – interpreting information for stakeholders
- Policy analyst – analyzing policy alternatives with their likely consequences



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Process Expert Roles (focus on facilitation)

- Stakeholder analyst – meeting with stakeholder groups to understand their views on the issue
- Meeting convener/facilitator – bringing stakeholders together to exchange views and build understanding
- Issue framer – finding a way to describe the issue in public terms to increase the chances of public participation



Process Expert Roles

(Continued)

- Public forum convener – developing a process to involve the public in seeking solutions to a public problem
- Forum moderator – facilitating a public discussion to produce deliberation and shared understanding
- Designer/facilitator of a formal dispute resolution process – functioning as part of a trained Extension team in dealing with polarized issues/disputes



Conclusions and Caveats

- Be very careful about using the following terms: scientific, research-based and unbiased. They are all over-rated and over-used. Besides, they can backfire on you, and you don't need that
- Instead, use the term “evidence”
- Be aware of the limits of your own knowledge and expertise, but if you are staying within those limits, there is no need to be deferential or timid
- “Balance” is NOT necessarily appropriate in educational outreach – can you think of circumstances in your own field where it would or would not be?



References/ Reading

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Thanks for coming!

Good luck in your outreach!



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