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A Thoughtfully Composed Extension Advisory Council

Stakeholder dialogue has been a “*100 year tradition*” of Utah State University Extension. Feedback has often come from the daily interactions with those we serve, whether in the field, home, community, or with youth. Learning from and dialoging about the thoughts, ideas, and desires of Utahans is critical to creating connectedness in a valued service organization. Many of us have our “stakeholder favorites,” whose input we value and trust and who daily shape the directions Extension may take. Sometimes we may feel uncomfortable seeking the opinions and identifying the needs of those who may have been historically underserved in our communities. However, just as Extension program participants should represent the demographic composition of the county, volunteers and advisory boards should also be representative of our communities. Empowering a thoughtfully composed Extension Advisory Council which reflects the demographic composition of Utah communities will help us be more responsive to both identifying needs and then structuring research and programs to meet those needs. Have you considered the composition of state, county, and affinity advisory boards and councils you interact with? Are they reflective of all segments of the population to be served? How do you get stakeholders to volunteer to serve on advisory boards and councils? When advisory boards and councils are convened is there meaningful dialogue? Are expectations established with members requiring connectedness to Extension beyond an occasional meeting?

Questions such as these and others should govern the approach to establishing advisory councils and action committees. It takes time, effort, commitment, perseverance, encouragement, and sometimes just down right good luck to get an Extension Advisory Council functioning. As Extension faculty and professionals, it is incumbent that we identify potential members of councils and establish meaningful ways to cultivate their interaction with advisory council activities. One of the first steps in creating stronger relationships with advisory boards and councils is recognizing that community interaction is important and that by welcoming community engagement, programs can be designed which are responsive to community need. Personal contact, friendship development, personal letters, action assignments, and other activities go a long way in creating the necessary linkages to make advisory council members feel welcome, valued, and connected with Extension. Connecting with potential minority members as advisory council representatives takes time and many trust building interactions. A letter of invitation to join the advisory board may not do it alone! Establish a purposeful advisory council, by first establishing a plan with goals and aspirations, then work the plan, document the efforts made, and plan for success.

See the following links from Extension Extnet for a helpful article and PowerPoint presentation for working with culturally diverse advisory boards:

<https://extnet.usu.edu/diversity/docs/CulturallyDiverse1105.pdf>

<https://extnet.usu.edu/diversity/ppt/AdvisoryBoards2.ppt>

The Goal: Each county office and specialist affinity group should set a goal to have an active advisory council in place during 2008 that will identify and establish community/state based plans of work to drive engaged research, and programs that meaningfully serve stakeholders.

"Utah State University is an affirmative action/equal opportunity institution."