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Education in the Face of Controversy: When Water and Politics Mix

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Abstract: Is public education possible in an environment of extreme controversy? This article relates the experience of a team of Extension and Experiment Station faculty involved in publishing a report related to a water conflict in Oregon and California. We outline the steps we took and key contributors to success, while suggesting improvements in the process. We highlight the importance of the following: (1) accuracy and quality, (2) processes to ensure balance, (3) public input, (4) participation by communications professionals, (5) careful planning for publication release, and (6) efforts to manage relations with interest groups.

Communities face complex choices related to natural resources, economic development, and the environment. In times of controversy, they often turn to Extension to facilitate dialogue and public education. While Extension educators are eager to work with community members on issues of importance, there are risks. It is difficult to maintain a reputation as unbiased, and long-term relationships with client groups can be a help or a hindrance.

This article relates the experience of a team of Extension and Experiment Station faculty who published a report related to a water conflict in Oregon and California. We outline our steps and identify key contributors to success, while suggesting improvements in the process. Our lessons are relevant to anyone undertaking public education on complex, controversial topics.

The report, *Water Allocation in the Klamath Reclamation Project, 2001*, was intended as a resource for policy makers, citizens, administrators, journalists, and others. It consisted of 20 chapters on topics including fish biology, economic impacts, soil science, water law, waterfowl migration, and sociology. Our intent was to offer a system-wide assessment— an alternative to the typical focus on individual aspects of the problem. We hoped to show how decisions and actions in one area (for example, irrigation water deliveries) might affect other parts of the system (for example, wildlife refuges or social service agencies). The ultimate goal was to facilitate a search for creative solutions. The report is available at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/html/sr/sr1037-e/>.

Background

In April 2001, requirements to conserve endangered and threatened fish, combined with a severe drought, resulted in curtailment of irrigation water deliveries on the Klamath Reclamation Project, an area covering 200,000 acres straddling the Oregon-California border. The ensuing conflicts among irrigators, federal agencies, Native American tribes, and conservation groups made national headlines.

All of these groups had legal claims to the water. For example:

- **Native Americans:** United States treaty responsibilities require that sufficient water be retained in waterways to support the Klamath Indians' tribal fishing rights.
- **Irrigators:** In the early 1900s, homesteaders on the Klamath Reclamation Project were assessed charges to repay Project development costs and in turn received irrigation water rights. Many of today's Project farmers are descendants of those homesteaders.
- **Wildlife refuges:** The Upper Klamath Basin is home to two wildlife refuges. The U.S. Bureau of Reclamation must ensure adequate water for the refuges, as long as water is available.
- **Downstream fisheries:** Court rulings have established that the Yurok Tribe's fishing rights require Klamath River flows sufficient to maintain fisheries. Coastal fishing communities also depend on the river's salmon runs.
- **Endangered species:** Coho salmon in the Klamath River below Upper Klamath Lake and two species of lake suckers are protected under the Endangered Species Act. Before making decisions about irrigation releases, the Bureau of Reclamation must consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to ensure adequate lake and river levels for fish.

Endangered Species Act considerations were a major factor leading to the irrigation curtailment in 2001. Thus, the conflict quickly became characterized as farmers versus big government and farmers versus fish. Emotions reached a fevered pitch, as irrigators organized bucket brigades and opened irrigation head gates. Local businesses feared economic collapse. Competing federal agencies traded accusations, while Indian tribes defended their treaty rights. Anger about the situation often manifested itself as anger against groups with opposing interests.

The Role of Extension in Public Policy Education and Controversial Issues

Because of Extension's interdisciplinary nature and its credibility within communities, it is well positioned to address complex, controversial issues. Barrows (1984) makes a case for Extension's involvement in public issues education, stating, "Extension is publicly funded for the specific purpose of applying the knowledge of the land-grant university to improve the quality of life of the people." In 1992, the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) issued a position statement titled *Public Issues Education: The Cooperative Extension System's Role in Addressing Public Issues*. It defined public issues education as "educational programs that have the objective of enhancing the society's capacity to understand and address issues of

widespread concern."

Schumacher and Lloyd (1997) suggest that Extension's role in public policy education is to (a) "make highly technical information available to farmers and the public in an understandable form; (b) to provide unbiased information; (c) to help create a forum in which all stakeholders have an opportunity for input; and (d) to provide education for our clientele."

Methods

As controversy boiled in the Klamath Basin, Oregon State University (OSU) and University of California (UC) faculty participated in meetings throughout the region. Community members— primarily the agricultural community and public officials— expressed concern about the information reported in the media and asked the universities to help develop reliable data on the consequences of the irrigation curtailment. A team of scientists, local Extension faculty, administrators, and communications specialists from OSU and UC agreed in July 2001 to prepare a report on ecological, economic, social, and policy issues relevant to the controversy.

The report team included the following:

- **Faculty Specialists:** Twenty-eight faculty specialists from the two universities wrote sections of the report. They represented widely diverse disciplines and views regarding the controversy.
- **Editor:** An Extension editor was responsible for editing, fact checking, reviewing public comments, and integrating the parts of the report.
- **Project Leader:** The OSU Extension assistant agriculture program leader served as overall project coordinator.
- **Local Extension Leader:** A long-time Extension agriculture agent was instrumental in the decision to prepare the report and in managing relations with community leaders and interest groups.
- **Media Specialists:** Extension communicators helped to develop and implement the release strategy and prepared authors for media interactions.

The report development process can be divided into five stages:

1. Planning,
2. Writing and peer review,
3. Public comment,
4. Refining, and

5. Release.

At each stage, key decisions affected the ultimate success of the report.

Stage 1. Planning

In July 2001, the team toured the Klamath Falls area, met with interested parties, and outlined the project. Group meetings to refine our strategy and timeline continued over the following months. These discussions focused largely on questions of bias, credibility, and report format.

The Twin Challenges of Bias and Credibility

As educators, we sought to be "unbiased." Yet, Blaine and Patton (2000) argue that "unbiased" or "value-free" education is impossible. When educators report the results of a particular study, for example, they implicitly show their own bias about what is important or credible. We felt that we could minimize bias by ensuring input from a wide variety of groups, including farmers, Native American tribes, conservation groups, and federal agencies.

Our initial contacts with some of these groups reflected the difficulty in addressing controversial issues, especially when Extension's traditional clients (e.g., commercial agriculture) are involved. Some groups saw irrigators as "the other side" and indicated concern that the report would reflect only an agricultural perspective. Again, ensuring broad public input seemed the best way to build credibility.

Report Format

Public issues run a gamut from single-question issues to those involving complex, interconnected relationships. Patton and Blaine (2001) develop a typology of public issues: those with a clear underlying problem and solution (Type I), those with a clear underlying problem but multiple possible solutions (Type II), and those where there is no consensus on the problem, thus leading to multiple proposed solutions, each addressing the problem as seen by a specific group (Type III).

Likewise, public policy educators can choose from a variety of educational approaches. Barrows (1984) examines an Advocacy model, in which the educator takes a stand, and an Alternatives-Consequences model, in which the educator helps to clarify the issue and outlines policy alternatives and likely consequences. Goodwin (1993) argues that these approaches are more appropriate for issues with clear options and consequences (Type II) than for those involving complex social questions and value judgments (Type III). For this type of issue, he proposes a Contrasting Viewpoints model, in which the educator broadly examines different perspectives, thus helping to moderate viewpoints and improve public understanding.

With multiple parties defining the problem differently and supporting different solutions, the Klamath controversy was clearly a Type III issue in the Patton-Blaine schema. Thus, the report would need to address the many facets of the problem.

We first decided what we would *not* do. There would be no advocacy, and we would not attempt to achieve consensus among authors. Each author was responsible for the content of his or her chapter. Although authors were required to consider all comments, no attempt was made to achieve consensus within the team. The result was a hybrid of public education models: Some authors followed the Alternatives-Consequences model, while others adopted the Contrasting Viewpoints model.

Stage 2. Writing and Peer Review

Writing and peer review occurred between July and December 2001, although reviews continued throughout the public comment period. Team members were encouraged to review all chapters. Authors obtained external peer review as time permitted.

Stage 3. Public Review and Comment

Massey (1994) stresses the error of focusing on research-based information to the exclusion of community values. He notes that this approach fails to acknowledge the imperfection of scientific research, ignores diversity, and guarantees that the educator's bias will color the educational program. As noted above, we felt that broad public input would reduce bias and enhance credibility. Thus, we made public review an integral part of the project.

We released a draft for public review on December 14, 2001 and presented it at a public meeting at the OSU Klamath County Extension office on December 19. We invited the public to comment at the meeting, by mail, or by e-mail. The public comment period ended on January 25, 2002.

The comment period was intense and emotional. The atmosphere at the presentation was tense, with criticism focused on the science surrounding the status of fish populations in Upper Klamath Lake. We also received numerous written comments. Many argued that we had overlooked concerns of Indian tribes and others outside of commercial agriculture, some pointed out minor errors, others questioned methodology and results in the economic and fish biology chapters, and a few attacked authors perceived to be aligned with agricultural interests. The reviewers included a wide range of citizens and agency scientists.

The project leader reviewed and distributed comments to authors. Authors were expected to revise their chapters in response to comments.

Stage 4. Refining the Report

With the second draft in hand, the editor rewrote phrases that were "red flags" for various groups, checked facts, and ensured consistency. A greater effort was made to include the viewpoints of Native American tribes. The editor and project leader again reviewed all public comments to ensure that concerns had been addressed. The editor, project leader, and individual authors worked together to resolve particularly difficult issues.

The final step was to synthesize our findings in a "Lessons Learned" section. Because the editor was most familiar with the entire report, she drafted this section and worked with authors on its final wording.

Stage 5. Release

The final report was released in December 2002. OSU media specialists helped to develop a release plan. Our goal was to maximize visibility and serious consideration of the report while minimizing political fallout from dissatisfied groups. We recognized that our effort to be balanced would antagonize some groups that had long supported Extension. The economic impact results were expected to generate the most controversy. We anticipated vocal criticism from irrigators, who argued that our community-level assessment of net economic impact overlooked the pain felt by individual farmers.

We followed many of the strategies suggested by Bailey (2002), who noted the challenge of addressing

impacts on all stakeholders without alienating traditional client groups. Among the solutions he suggests are forewarning university administrators and briefing stakeholders before the report is released.

We provided prerelease copies to key interest groups and elected officials, followed by electronic and print publication and delivery to the media. In addition to preparing press releases and providing counsel regarding the timing of release, an Extension and Experiment Station Communications news writer helped authors prepare for media interviews.

Klamath County Extension faculty and some authors personally delivered the report and presented findings to key groups. As expected, irrigators reacted strongly to the economic impact conclusion. The team economists continued to meet with these groups over the coming months to explain the report's findings.

Lessons Learned

During a post-release debriefing, team members evaluated both their own experiences with the project and public feedback to the report. This section draws on that evaluation.

Key Successes

Report Format

- The decision to allow authors to express different points of view was critical to success. We could not have achieved consensus among such a large group of authors representing a wide variety of disciplines and perspectives.

Internal Review

- The internal review improved the report's balance. Team members were quick to question statements that seemed biased.
- The internal cross-discipline review challenged us to step outside our areas of expertise and grapple with an extremely multifaceted problem. Without it, the report would have been less useful to those who must seek comprehensive solutions to a complex problem.
- Cross-discipline review encouraged authors to make the material understandable to a broader audience.

The Editor

- By including the editor from the outset, we ensured that she understood relationships among the topics, appreciated the intensity of the controversy, and recognized issues of importance to various groups.
- The editor made a special effort to ensure that comments from outside the university's traditional client groups were considered, thereby assuring greater balance.

- The editor's persistence in confirming details ensured that careless mistakes would not destroy credibility.

The Project Leader

- The project leader was key in helping authors resolve points of contention.
- The project leader's and editor's careful scrutiny ensured that authors did not stray into advocacy or inadvertently offend concerned groups. It also ensured that authors did not gloss over concerns that were inconvenient to address.

Public Review and Comment

- Public review and comment greatly improved the report. Reviewers identified issues that needed more detailed treatment, provided multiple perspectives, and shared rich local knowledge.
- By providing all interested parties the opportunity to have input, public review enhanced the report's credibility.

Release Strategy

- By providing prerelease copies to interest groups and political leaders, we gave them a "heads up" and sent the message that they were valued players.
- Author preparation for interviews increased success in getting "our version" of the story into the media.
- Active involvement by respected local Extension faculty maintained a line of communication with client groups.
- The visible support of top university administrators was crucial. When irrigators strongly criticized the report's findings, the Dean of the OSU College of Agricultural Sciences stood behind faculty and made time for communication with key groups and politicians.

Suggestions for Improvement

- Some authors were perceived as being aligned with specific interest groups. Public hostility might have been reduced had we considered author backgrounds more carefully.
- We were unable to meet with all interested parties on our initial visit. Thus, we did not anticipate all issues, leading some groups to feel we had neglected important points. More careful preparation could have helped authors be more proactive in addressing these issues.

- Additional external peer review would have improved the first draft and enhanced credibility among the public.
- It was challenging to acknowledge any group's concerns without becoming "aligned" to its position in the eyes of others. Groups with no strong university connection accused us of blindly supporting agricultural interests, while farmers felt betrayed by our acknowledgment of others' concerns.
- Ideally, we would have invited public comment on the second draft. However, the need for timely completion made this impractical.
- Despite our planning, some newspaper headlines reflected interest groups' reactions to the report rather than our findings. We needed to do a better job of focusing media attention on the report's content rather than on "sound bites" from unhappy interest groups.

Conclusion

With its breadth of expertise, credibility, and local contacts, Extension has a unique capability to produce comprehensive educational materials in a complex, controversial environment. Such endeavors epitomize the land-grant mission to provide citizens with research-based education and tools to help them solve local problems.

Nonetheless, the investment of time, energy, and emotion in such projects is great. The margin for error is small, and pressure from interest groups is high.

The process described in this article, along with the suggestions for improvement, may enhance the likelihood of success. We conclude that:

- Accuracy is critical to maintaining credibility.
- The presence of adequate checks and balances within the project team is key to ensuring balance.
- Public input is essential.
- Communications professionals must play a key role.
- Careful planning for publication release is important.
- Key team members must devote adequate time and energy to managing relations with interest groups.

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