

Partnering with Private Industry—Ground Rules for Working Together

Abstract

Extension has a history of partnering with private industry to support critical programs and research projects. However, these partnerships have the potential to present both actual and perceived conflicts of interest at the institutional and individual levels. A recent project in Ohio established a shared funding partnership arrangement among university, local government, and private industry to support a local survey project. To minimize conflicts of interest, an Ohio State University Extension team developed a one-page partnership document to guide the research project. This simple process helped to protect the integrity of Extension, and the credibility of the research project.

Eric Romich

Assistant Professor
Ohio State University
Extension
Marion, Ohio
romich.2@osu.edu

Joseph Campbell

Research Associate &
Lecturer
Ohio State School of
Environment and
Natural Resources
Columbus, Ohio
campbell.844@osu.edu
[u](#)

Introduction

As Extension celebrates its 100-year anniversary, we take great pride in reflecting on the positive individual and community impacts that resulted from Extension programming efforts across the country. "The land-grant university, including the Experiment Station and Extension, has achieved a reputation for being an unbiased and objective educational resource" (Fowler, 1991, p.1). Regardless of historical achievements, a consistent reduction in budget allocations from traditional sources threatens the long-term sustainability of Extension. Over the years, the number of local Extension offices has declined, yet approximately 2,900 Extension offices remain nationwide (USDA/NIFA, 2014). Extension, with fewer resources, must re-think how to fund program development and critical research to serve a growing, increasingly diverse constituency.

Extension has a history of partnering with private industry to identify knowledge gaps, solve problems, and help financially support critical Extension programs and research projects. While there are clear opportunities for such partnerships, these efforts have the potential to present both actual and perceived conflicts of interest at the institutional and individual levels. As we consider new private sector partnerships it is essential that we "protect [our] objectivity and strengthen [our] reputation as unbiased research and education resources" (Fowler, 1991, p.1). To maintain the reputation Extension

worked 100 years to establish, partnership agreements with private industry must be clearly communicated in writing, using a language that is easily understood and functional.

This article demonstrates how a team of educators developed and implemented a partnering arrangement guided by a one page document titled *Ground Rules for Working Together* to guide a private/public research project while protecting the integrity of Ohio State University (OSU) Extension and the research.

The Situation—Wind Development in Ohio

In Ohio, as an increasing number of wind farms are being proposed, county commissioners are faced with the difficult decision of approving or denying the proposed wind farm siting through creation of an alternative energy zone. This decision can generate millions of dollars in local tax revenue, but will alter the landscape of the community for decades. According to Warren, Lumsden, O'Dowd, and Birnie (2005), "survey evidence indicates that people's viewpoints towards wind farm development is influenced by the nature of the planning and development process: the earlier, more open and participatory the process, the greater the likelihood of public support" (p. 858).

To engage the community and guide informed decision-making by local elected officials on a proposed wind farm in Wyandot County, OSU Extension partnered with the OSU School of Environment and Natural Resources, the Wyandot County Board of Commissioners, and industry professionals in a survey research project. The project involved surveying 700 households to gather data on current knowledge, local support, attitudes, and opinions on emerging and potentially contentious energy and environmental issues. The survey research was funded by a partnership between university, local government, and private industry resources.

The Response—A Process for Partnering

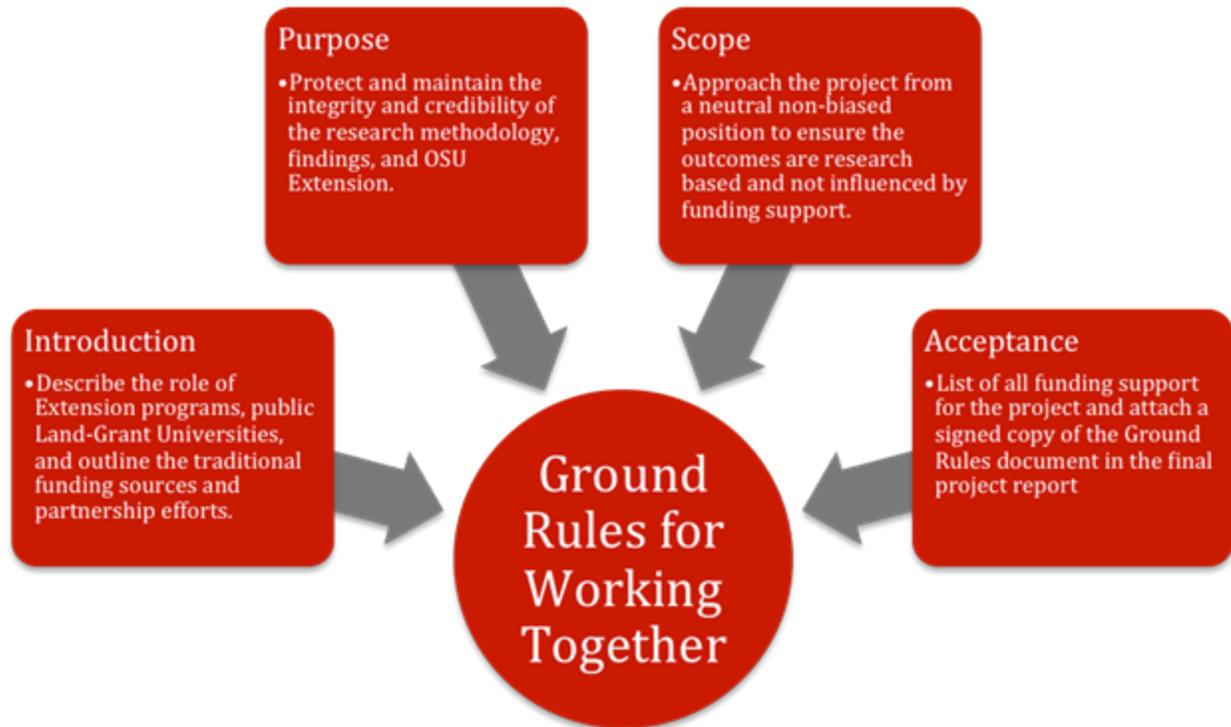
In Wyandot County, there was a clearly defined knowledge gap that the survey findings could help to address. Yet a key obstacle remained. With significant cuts to local government funds in Ohio and continuous reductions to Extension's budget, the question was raised, "who would be responsible for funding this study?" The wind developer could have funded the entire study; however, that would not represent true collaboration or non-biased research. It was determined the costs of this project should be split among the university, local government, and private industry. Even with a shared project funding arrangement, including a wind developer as a funding source for the study, the perception of the results was cause for concern.

To protect and maintain the integrity of Extension and our educators, we must be aware of potential conflicts of interest with private sector partnerships. According to Erickson (1991), "consistent policies, well-communicated, with excellent supervision can eliminate most problems with conflict of interest. But in the end, it comes down to the ethical and professional practices of the individual faculty member" (p. 2). As Erickson suggested, our project team developed a written document that was concise and used easily understood and functional language. Our project team worked with the OSU Extension leader for resource management to develop a document titled *Ground Rules for Working Together*, which was not legally binding, but a written summary of the roles and responsibilities for the research partnership. The cornerstones of the document include the

introduction, purpose, scope, and acceptance (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Principles of the Ground Rules for Working Together Agreement



The Document

The ground rules document was signed by a representative of the wind company prior to the start of the project and before funds were received. To maintain transparency, the partnership was outlined, and funding sources were identified in the acknowledgments section of the final report. Additionally, a signed copy of the ground rules document was included in the appendix of the report. A copy of the ground rules document can be retrieved at: www.go.osu.edu/wyandotwind. Results from the survey research were presented to each funding partner and then disseminated in the community.

Summary

Extension has a long history of partnering with the private sector to conduct research that informs critical Extension programs. According to Fishel (2014), "partnering with private industry can empower Extension educators to enhance their educational outreach efforts" (p. 1). To the extent possible, these partnerships must be managed from a neutral non-biased position to ensure the outcomes are research based and not influenced by funding sources.

In Wyandot County, funding was a major obstacle in proceeding with the survey research project. One county commissioner indicated that because local government funds were limited, the county was initially hesitant to support the study. However, by leveraging funds from university, local government, and private industry, the team was able to proceed with the project. According to local stakeholders, the knowledge gained from this project, compared to the investment, will prove to be

invaluable when making future energy related decisions.

This Ohio project, made possible by developing a simple document that clearly explains Extension's role in private sector partnerships and promoting ethical and professional practices by individual Extension Educators, demonstrates a best practice. The document used in Ohio can serve as a template that can be easily edited, replicated, and included as part of standardized process in Extension units across the nation.

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