

## **A Critical Time for Extension Leadership in Public Policy Education Programming**

### **Abstract**

We conducted research to examine 1862, 1890, and 1994 land-grant and Sea Grant Extension program leaders' perceptions about Extension public policy education (PPE). Most agreed that PPE is important work. Existing PPE has focused on issue-oriented community development, natural resources, or agriculture topics. Our results indicate that there is no clear priority, funding, or support for Extension PPE and that most programs lack associated policies or staff training. For Extension to fulfill its role in society, increased focus must be placed on PPE through administrative support and professional development that empowers everyone in Extension to build PPE into their work.

**Keywords:** [public policy education](#), [informing decision making](#), [professional development](#), [public issues evolution](#)

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Public policy issues are matters of widespread public concern that grow out of accumulated daily events, marked by a feeling that there is a gap between what is and what ought to be (Dale & Hahn, 1994). Public policy issues may involve disagreement and controversy that result from different roles, values, interests, and ideas. Public policy education (PPE), also referred to as public issues education, involves educational programs that have the objective of enhancing society's capacity to understand and address issues of widespread concern (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy and Extension Service, 1991). PPE is a multidisciplinary activity in which all Extension educators may be involved. The purpose of PPE is to promote an increased understanding of public issues, the process for establishing public policy, and strategies for effective participation so that residents are able to pursue informed policy choices (Walcott & Triezenberg, 2018). In carrying out PPE, Extension educators play a variety of roles, from helping communities identify, focus, and define issues to facilitating and informing the development of alternatives and consequences to supporting the actions of implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and adaptation (Hahn, 1988; Leong, Decker, Wild, & Karish, 2006).

Historically, PPE was seen as a priority in Cooperative Extension. The National Public Policy Education Conference, organized by the Farm Foundation, provided Extension educators with research-based information and educational materials and techniques on a variety of topics from its beginning in the 1950s through its final year in 2006 (Farm Foundation, n.d.). Other resources for guiding this work historically included the curriculum *Working with Our Publics Module 6: Education for Public Decisions* (House & Young, 1988), *Public Issues Education: A Handbook* (Dale, 1993), and *Public Issues Education: Increasing Competence in Resolving Public Issues* (Dale & Hahn, 1994).

The importance of Extension's role in PPE is highlighted in the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) 1991 position statement that "the Cooperative Extension System, with public issues education as a major component of its activities, is envisioned as a vital and important resource for the nation in the twenty-first century" (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy and Extension Service, 1991, p. 4). ECOP's statement included the idea that Extension would be known for the contribution it makes through its ability to initiate public discourse before a crisis point is reached, introduce relevant knowledge and expand the knowledge base, and broaden the range of alternatives.

Extension PPE expanded from the 1990s to the mid-2000s. In addition to the ECOP position statement, numerous *Journal of Extension* articles were devoted to the topic, including articles exploring Extension's role in PPE (Patton & Blaine, 2001) and evaluating skills needed to conduct PPE programs (Singletary, Hill, Smith, & Corcoran, 2004; Singletary et al., 2007). Since then, there appears to have been reduced attention to this work, both in the literature and in practice.

Given the need for Extension's continued relevance, it is vital that Extension professionals be prepared to engage in a variety of roles in support of PPE programming and that Extension as an organization continue to support this work. Part of that support involves providing direction to guide Extension professionals as they engage in PPE. In 2018, Michigan State University (MSU) Extension published the updated document *Public Policy Education Principles & Guidelines for MSU Extension*, prompting us to critically examine how Extension is preparing educators to conduct PPE programming. Here we present the results of our assessment and discuss what Extension can do to build a foundation for future work on public issues. As these issues grow increasingly complex, it is important that Extension educators are well prepared for helping communities address them. We wanted to know how much attention is being given to such preparation and what the preparation looks like.

## Methods

### Survey Description and Participation

During the summer of 2018, we conducted a national survey of Extension and Sea Grant administrators and program leaders to better understand the national context of Extension's PPE efforts and the degree to which Extension as an organization prepares its staff to conduct PPE programming. The survey was designed as a status and trends assessment of Extension PPE, and we asked respondents to rate the amount of effort their state Extension systems directed toward building the capacity of Extension professionals to work in the area of PPE. We also asked about the amount and nature of PPE programming in each state, the importance of such work, and factors that limit the capacity of Extension to do more in this area. We pilot tested the survey with MSU Extension administrators and modified it based on their

feedback. The institutional review board at MSU approved the methods used in the research (STUDY00000853, May 8, 2018).

We disseminated the survey to 257 Extension administrators and state program leaders, as identified on state Extension systems' websites, via two emails inviting recipients to complete the survey online. We achieved a 34% response rate ( $n = 87$ ). Some respondents did not complete all questions, and we did not impute responses for missing data.

Respondents were from 36 states and were evenly distributed regionally, with the highest proportion, at just over 30%, in Extension's North Central Region (Table 1). The vast majority of respondents (79%) were from 1862 land-grant institutions, with some (16%) from Sea Grant institutions and a few (5%) from historically Black colleges and universities (1890 land-grant institutions). Extension program leaders from tribal college Extension programs (1994 land-grant institutions) were invited to participate, but no responses were received.

**Table 1.**  
Geographic Distribution of Respondents by Extension Region

Region	Percentage	Count
Northeast	23.33	14
North Central	31.67	19
South	25.00	15
West	20.00	12
<i>Note. n = 60.</i>		

As shown in Table 2, respondents were mostly state program leaders, consistent with the primary audience targeted. Those selecting "other" overwhelmingly described themselves as an administrator or an Extension director.

**Table 2.**  
Respondents' Roles Within Extension

Role	Percentage	Count
State program leader	58.62	34
Specialist	3.45	2
Program coordinator	1.72	1
Educator/agent	3.45	2
Other	32.76	19
<i>Note. n = 58.</i>		

## Analyses

We used Qualtrics to calculate descriptive statistics and identified emergent themes in the open-ended comments using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006).

## Results

A total of 64 out of 87 respondents (74%) said their Extension systems did not have dedicated programs for building capacity of Extension professionals to work in the area of PPE. Respondents from only nine states (23 respondents) reported that their states did have dedicated capacity-building programs. With regard to amount of effort directed toward building Extension professionals' capacity for PPE, approximately 14% (12 respondents) reported that their state Extension systems dedicated a great deal of effort toward such capacity building (Table 3).

**Table 3.**

Amount of Effort Directed Toward Building Capacity of Extension Professionals for Public Policy Education

Answer	Percentage	Count
None	2.30	2
Very little	35.63	31
Some	48.28	42
A great deal	13.79	12

Respondents from almost every state said their Extension systems conducted some amount of PPE with community stakeholders across their states. Only three respondents said their systems did not engage in PPE work with communities.

In most cases, as shown in Table 4, the PPE programs that were occurring were issue-specific, though some respondents noted that the type of PPE programming conducted depended on context. Issue-specific PPE tends to fit the traditional "expert model" of Extension education whereby educators provide research-based education on a specific topic. Process-oriented PPE focuses more on the role of Extension educators as facilitators who provide relevant information but play a greater role in facilitating the decision-making process.

**Table 4.**

Characterization of Extension Public Policy Education Programs

Type	Percentage	Count
General	25.86	15
Process-oriented	18.97	11
Issue-specific	46.55	27

Other 8.62 5

*Note. n = 58.*

Most PPE that was occurring was in the areas of community development, natural resources, and agriculture. Table 5 shows the frequencies of respondents overall reporting that their states conducted PPE for the program areas identified. Table 6 shows the percentages of respondents in each region reporting PPE efforts for the program areas studied.

**Table 5.**  
Responses Regarding Conduct of Public Policy Education by Program Area

Program area	Percentage	Count
Agriculture	17.73	25
Community development	26.95	38
Health and nutrition	13.48	19
Natural resources	23.40	33
Youth development	9.93	14
None	2.13	3
Other	6.38	9

*Note.* Respondents could select multiple responses. None = "My state does not engage in public policy or public issues education."

**Table 6.**  
Responses Regarding Conduct of Public Policy Education in Each Program Area by Region

Region	Agriculture (%)	Community development (%)	Health and nutrition (%)	Natural resources (%)	Youth development (%)
Northeast	29	29	14	57	36
North Central	42	95	26	42	21
South	67	60	53	80	27
West	8	50	25	33	0

Of 61 respondents who answered the relevant survey question, 55 said that conducting PPE is an important role for Extension. Respondents who viewed PPE as important to Extension offered the following perspectives:

- "Very little public policy education and public issues education is available to the general public especially

in rural areas. This is an area where Extension could make a real difference."

- "It is critically important that all staff be educated in the impact that policies have on funding for Extension and that they know how to tell the Extension story to any stakeholder they may encounter. In addition, providing [foundational education] would allow for quicker response when specific public issues arise. Our staff and community advocates will be prepared."
- "There is a need for neutral brokers on policy matters."
- "We need to be taking the lead on conversations on these types of topics."
- "We can serve as unbiased facilitators."
- "There is a need for education around what the best available science and research tell us about policy-related issues. Further, citizens need more opportunities to be able to examine issues from multiple perspectives and to engage in a process where their voice is represented in policymaking. This fits in with the overall mission of Extension and Outreach."
- "Our lives and the lives of our citizens are impacted daily by public policy and education on these policies can and will help to improve many areas of their lives."
- "From the Positive Youth Development perspective, it is one way of insuring that there will be a future with community leaders who understand the importance of public policy, and also know how to maneuver within that arena."
- "I believe land-grant institutions [have a] moral and ethical obligation to provide policy makers with the information they need to create informed policy. Not communicating information that has the potential to improve policy is irresponsible."
- "It helps to support the very essence of the democratic process."
- "University science is [an] important underpinning to effective public policy. Extension links the two."

Despite the relatively high proportion of respondents who considered provision of PPE to be an important role for Extension, only 25% of respondents said their Extension systems placed even a moderate amount of importance on PPE, and a mere 5% felt their systems placed a great deal of importance on it. One respondent provided this comment: "We have a strong farm bill education program but very little beyond it. Public polic[y] education becomes a slippery slope that is misunderstood by the legislative leaders and industry partners." Another respondent commented, "We lacked the resources to continue this work and eliminated elements of our portfolio that could be provided by others. This is an area where Extension's role is not essential or required."

Responses to our survey also indicated that few states had a current or updated statement of principles document outlining the state's commitment to PPE, the role of educators in such work, and the support of administration for conduct of such work. Respondents from only four states said their states had such a

document, whereas 37 respondents said their states did not, and 22 were unsure.

Regarding reasons why Extension PPE programs did not exist or had been diminished, most respondents reported lack of funding (24 respondents) and/or lack of administration prioritization (22 respondents) (Table 7). It seems likely that there was significant overlap in these two responses as tight budgets force administrators to make decisions that reflect their priorities, including reducing emphasis on some programmatic areas. Survey participants who chose "other" as a response for why their Extension systems did not have PPE programs provided reasons such as lack of expertise, lack of educator understanding, lack of interest by department faculty in engaging with nonacademics, polarization of issues, and caution regarding the fine line between education and advocacy.

**Table 7.**  
Reasons Public Policy Education Programs No Longer  
Exist or Exist at Reduced Capacity

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Count</b>
Lack of funding	36.92	24
Lack of national leadership	6.15	4
Not a priority for administration	33.85	22
Other	23.08	15

## Discussion

Extension leaders generally agree that PPE is important work, though they are not specifically directed to provide leadership on PPE and often have limited funding for doing so. With no clear priority, funding, or leadership for conducting PPE, the critical Extension role for enhancing society is not being fulfilled, and long-term investment in the Cooperative Extension funding model is at risk.

Extension PPE occurring throughout the United States is primarily issue-oriented and is primarily within the areas of community development, natural resources, and agriculture—traditional Extension topic areas. Extension's foundation in agriculture is an important component of the more than 100-year history of being a trusted, community-based university program (Dwyer et al., 2017). Extension is well known for its agriculture programs but also provides valuable programming related to a wide spectrum of public issues, such as the social determinants of health domains of economic stability, education, social and community context, health and health care, and neighborhood and built environment (Tiret, 2017). With over 80% of U.S. residents living in urban areas and increased rates of death by suicide and drug overdose, Extension has a real opportunity to rethink its relevancy, systems approach, and leadership in topics relevant to both rural and urban communities within the social determinants of health framework. The areas in the framework are, by nature, public policy issues around which Extension can engage in PPE work. However, for Extension to address public policy, the organization's leadership will need to prioritize PPE, invest funding in relevant initiatives, and provide training for staff. We were not able to detect trends for the reasons why some Extension systems do not engage in PPE work in communities. More research is needed to identify barriers.

Two critical components of effective PPE work are clear guidelines for Extension professionals and a clear statement from administration supporting the engagement of educators in this work. As noted, respondents from only four states said their states had a current or updated document outlining the state's commitment to PPE and the role of educators in such work. Without such a statement, educators may be unsure to what degree they are expected to engage in PPE and what level of support they can expect from administration if they do.

Respondents' explanations for why PPE programs no longer exist or exist at a reduced capacity seem indicative of the place many in Extension find themselves relative to PPE work and highlight the need for increased attention to capacity building for PPE. Professional development programs can help Extension staff increase their capabilities for working on critical issues and working across differences with stakeholders. We suggest that Extension professionals can best address community needs by helping stakeholders incorporate diverse viewpoints about public issues into their own decisions and by helping participants engage in collaborative decision making. MSU Extension's recently updated *Public Policy Education Principles & Guidelines* (Walcott & Triezenberg, 2018) builds on prior work, including work from the Public Issues Education Competencies Task Force (2002), to address these needs and identifies and defines the following roles Extension educators can play in conducting PPE:

- information provider—sharing research-based information,
- convener—encouraging stakeholder interaction and problem solving,
- facilitator—organizing meetings and focusing on decision-making processes,
- program developer—assisting with long-term program development and implementation strategies,
- analyst—gathering and interpreting relevant information,
- forecaster—analyzing emerging issues,
- networker—identifying and linking people and resources to increase knowledge,
- diplomat—encouraging stakeholders to work together, and
- trainer—providing nonformal and informal learning experiences.

Even with limited resources to allocate to PPE, Extension can maximize its impact by reinforcing that PPE is the responsibility of educators throughout Extension and by providing staff the training needed to be effective in this work. We recommend that professional development should be focused on (a) process-oriented approaches and skill building and (b) general leadership for the common good. Process-oriented approaches include helping participants move from problem definition to problem resolution, define and agree on a problem to be solved, engage in collaborative decision making, separate interests from their positions on a public issue, incorporate diverse viewpoints about public issues into their own decisions, and apply methods for evaluating PPE program impacts (Singletary et al., 2007). Providing leadership for the common good includes developing a shared understanding of public problems, building coalitions to support

possible changes, altering shared power arrangements, and creating collective benefits for all (Crosby & Bryson, 2005).

The bottom line is that for Extension to fulfill its role in society, increased focus must be placed on PPE through administrative support and professional development that empowers everyone in Extension to build PPE into their work.

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