

Support Staff Levels in County Extension Offices

UWEX staff and the county support staff are employed to help the University of Wisconsin Extension and county government meet their joint goal of bringing the university's resources to the people of Wisconsin. Staffing patterns need to be judged in light of their ability to fulfill this mission.

- UWEX works in cooperation with their county partner in deciding the programming and staffing levels of the UWEX staff in the county offices. We recognize that county government has the lead role in setting support staff levels. Our guiding principal is that we retain and expand our UWEX staff first because they are the source of our programming.
- Ratios of UWEX staff to support staff in county offices vary for several reasons. These should be explored when considering the appropriate support staff levels:
 - Support staff may have additional roles (Fair secretary, tourism receptionist, etc)
 - The extent of university and county administrative responsibility
 - Faculty/academic staff programming levels
 - The extent to which support staff have been designated program assistant roles (coordination with Master Gardeners in counties with no agriculture agent, for example)
 - County policies with respect to seniority or union obligations
 - The technical skills or technical capabilities in the office
 - Whether or not the extension office is located off site from the courthouse
 - Others _____
- Typically, counties accrue more savings when they reduce local support staff than when they reduce university extension staff. However, because the employment and financial obligations differ, counties may actually find it easier to reduce UWEX staff than support staff.
- Although direct comparisons are difficult to make, we should recognize that some county extension offices do have lower ratios of staff to support staff than organizations do of a similar size and mission (other units of government, the non-profit sector, and private sector service businesses).

Operating Extension Offices More Efficiently

Extension will undoubtedly have to operate more efficiently in the future as all levels of government seek to reduce public expenditures while still trying to meet core missions. Cutback management, as described by Robert Behn, is challenging and requires us to think more strategically. There are guidelines we can follow in attempting to meet this challenge.

- Gather data on staffing patterns of other locally based organizations with similar missions or operations (county departments, state agencies, local nonprofits, local service providers). Analyze their ratios compared to ours.
- Review the support staff job descriptions compared to the work that is actually done and the needs of the office, all in light of the Extension office mission.
- Recognize the political trade-offs of some of the service roles played by the extension support staff. For example, some may value the role support staff plays for the Fair or the Economic Development Corporation more than that played for the Extension Office. The work done on behalf of these entities may allow for the Extension role.
- Conduct an analysis of support staff work loads. How is the support staff time spent? What is it spent on? Does the time spent match the highest priorities of the office?
- Consider the minimal support staff levels that would be needed to complete the core mission of the Extension office. What work would not get done? List these activities and events.
- Consider other changes in the office that would be required to operate efficiently with less support staff – more technology, less service work.