

***Foundations of Political Effectiveness
in Cooperative Extension—2009***

Political Effectiveness—What and Why?

Political effectiveness has always been a part of Cooperative Extension, across all program areas and positions. Political effectiveness is really about building positive relationships. It is not about taking a political position, advocacy, or lobbying.

Part of our effectiveness lies in how we interact personally and professionally with those who have a role to play in supporting Extension. Another part is the quality and impact of our work on audiences that influence decision makers.

It may be tempting to say “Political effectiveness is not part of my job description.” Yet as we visit the question of “what is political effectiveness?” it will become clear that position descriptions for county educators, state specialists and administrators contain language that fits the description of being politically effective.

We have increasingly seen that all program areas have significant reasons to interact with elected officials, leaders of organizations, and partners on programs that have community impacts—whether it is a particular community of interest or a community of place. More importantly, we have seen “politically effective” work because our programs have a significant impact on people dealing with challenges in their lives or communities trying to make important decisions.

More than ever before, we all must recognize the value and impact of our roles within Cooperative Extension—particularly with the people we serve as Extension professionals. Political effectiveness means first and foremost that we have strong research and Extension education programs. It means that we take the time to evaluate our programs and to tell our stories about the impact of our work. It means that we are effective in our interpersonal and professional relationships with our audiences and elected officials. It means that every Extension educator has a role and responsibility in his or her community.

County department heads, center directors, academic department chairs, district directors, program directors and the dean’s office all have important roles to play in political effectiveness for Cooperative Extension. However, their influence on Extension’s behalf works only when county educators and state specialists first build the foundation of being politically effective.

The economic climate in recent years has brought into sharp focus the critical relationship of our funding partners and the dynamic interdependence of county, state, and federal contributions to the Cooperative Extension budget. Most of our budget is used to directly support people, pay salaries and provide benefits. The potential for cuts from any one of our funding partners can impact the entire organization.

The Political Effectiveness Work Group has taken into consideration many dimensions of political effectiveness and has sought input from across our organization to develop a document and set of reference resources that will help Cooperative Extension navigate in today’s environment.

