

Foundations of Political Effectiveness in Cooperative Extension—2009

Case study: COLUMBIA COUNTY

Situation

In 2003 and 2004, Columbia County faced difficult budgetary times. The county board focused on keeping mandated programs and considered eliminating those that were not mandated. Cooperative Extension was deemed a non-mandated program and seen as "nice but not necessary." As a result, the county Extension office experienced a 23 percent budget reduction. The dairy and livestock positions were eliminated. In preparation for the 2004 budget, the Family Living position was reduced from 100 to 75 percent, and the CNRED position was reduced from 80 to 50 percent. The office also lost one support staff position.

Response

Cooperative Extension staff recognized the need to build awareness among county board supervisors of the value and relevance of Cooperative Extension work. In addition, it became apparent that they needed to develop and strengthen relationships with county board supervisors, committees and county departments. As a group, Extension staff developed an external relations plan. The immediate response included the following:

- Cooperative Extension staff met one-on-one with each of the 31 county board supervisors to talk about initiatives in the Cooperative Extension office, as well as Cooperative Extension's history, mission, role and purpose. During these meetings Cooperative Extension colleagues asked supervisors to identify constituent issues Cooperative Extension might address in the future and influential county residents to serve on a Community Partner Advisory Group (CPAG).
- Recognizing that 4-H was a familiar entity to the county board, the 4-H educator asked the county board to help teach 4-H members about local government. Each 4-H family identified their county board supervisor. Small groups of 4-H youth met with and interviewed the supervisor from their district. The youth then wrote articles for the 4-H newsletter that reported what they learned about county government. They created poster board displays that reflected their 4-H involvement and information about their supervisor. 4-H members hosted a reception prior to a county board meeting at which they displayed the poster boards and then attended the county board meeting.

Additional steps taken over the past three years to strengthen Cooperative Extension's role in Columbia County included the following:

- Cooperative Extension staff made a concerted effort to learn more about the county's climate and culture, including expectations of county departments and chain-of-command procedures. Cooperative Extension, as a county department, began to function in a way that brought the department into better alignment with the county's climate and culture, rather than operating as an independent

entity. For example, the Cooperative Extension department head began to regularly attend county board monthly meetings, which helped build relationships and connections with other county department heads and supervisors.

- Cooperative Extension staff recognized that an essential role for the office is to address the highest priority needs as identified by the county. To do this, Cooperative Extension colleagues work closely with other county partners and appear in front of county board committees (including Judiciary, Health and Human Services, Executive and Finance), making sure they serve as a valued part of county government. Cooperative Extension colleagues make it a habit to ask county partners how they can support citizens, working hard to be an integral part of county government within the educational mission of Cooperative Extension.
- When Cooperative Extension positions became available, staff worked closely with county board supervisors and appropriate committees to identify specific position description details based on what the county thought was important.

Outcomes

As a result of the relationships built with county board supervisors, Cooperative Extension had an opportunity to renegotiate fiscal and program resources when a retirement was announced within the office in 2007. In preparation for the 2008 budget, the Cooperative Extension department head met with county board members and county department heads to determine how Cooperative Extension could help address gaps within local government services. As a result, the Family Living position was reinstated to 100 percent and the CNRED position was reinstated back to 80 percent.

Lessons Learned

The most important lesson learned was the importance of building and maintaining relationships with the various partners in the county. Building relationships with supervisors, committees and department heads is a two-way street of ongoing conversations about county needs. By fostering relationships and working strategically with county partners, programming is stronger and better than it would have been if one entity had done it alone. New programming—such as creating a county-wide Employee Nutrition Education E-Series with Human Resources, facilitating a lake planning process with Land and Water Conservation, co-coordinating a county-wide permanent medicine collection program with Solid Waste, and creating and carrying out the Changing Population Initiative and the Youth Governance Initiative with the Executive Committee—is created by listening to the county's needs and finding out how Cooperative Extension can fill a gap in county services while remaining true to our mission.

The Cooperative Extension office knows that it does not want to become complacent. The staff realizes that the political climate can change quickly and that political effectiveness is a work in progress. County staff is committed to looking at this as a long-term, ongoing process of relationship building, listening and learning—not just something in short bursts during difficult times. This must be the way Columbia County Cooperative Extension does business. Listening to various partners within the county and looking for opportunities to work together—that is the message. This is what we in Cooperative Extension do best.