

April 14, 2004

Department of Ag/Agbusiness Engagement and Controversy Philosophy

Statement of Philosophy

We are Community/County based educators/facilitators actively engaging the public. Involvement in controversial issues is part of the role of University of Wisconsin County/Community based faculty and staff members. Their access to the resources of the University place give them the unique ability to provide unbiased information. Information and individual professional comments provided by the Ag/AgBusiness Academic Department faculty will be unbiased, balanced, factual, research based information, to be used by clientele to make informed decisions, and develop a more profitable, productive, environmentally sound agriculture in Wisconsin. Community/County based faculty and staff may employ their facilitation and interpersonal skills to assist the public in proactively engaging in discussions of complex or volatile community issues.

Supporting framework

The Academic Department of Ag/AgBusiness and its members embrace the following principles:

- It is the responsibility of faculty and staff to present researched based information to support informed decision-making.
- The process of engagement may lead to conflict. Conflict that catalyzes change within a democratic process is generally positive.
- Faculty and staff can be most effective in pursuing engagement with a respectful dialog that features tolerance of different views.
- There are circumstances and situations when the skills and background of faculty and staff members fail to meet the demands of the problem. Engagement should not be pursued in situations beyond the capacity of the department member and/or the organization.
- Administrative level support of faculty and staff must be strong and consistent.
- To ensure that administrative level support is present and warranted, when faculty and staff members have reservations about their involvement in controversial issues they will consult colleagues, mentors, and the appropriate administrators for advice.
- County/Community based faculty and staff are in a highly complex situation in cases of controversy because they have many bosses such as UWEX administration, county oversight committees, county board administrative coordinators, administrators or executives.
- County/Community based faculty and staff live and work in the communities involved in controversy. There are often expectations by clientele that they should support the points of view held by their clientele.
- Faculty and staff must be willing to provide accurate research based information to all sides of a controversial issue.

Examples of Engagement and Controversy

The academic department of Ag/Agbusiness identifies the following four areas of work that illustrate the potential for engagement and conflict. The list is not all inclusive.

Community Issues. Agricultural agents understand the economic and social elements of farm operations. Because of their ability to articulate this point of view faculty and staff are often called upon and expected to enlighten the public on the overall economic impact of agriculture to the local economy. In this process, faculty and staff may appear to be an advocate for a certain segment of agriculture, or may be accused of being biased. Examples include: Land Use Issues, Ethanol Production, Farm Modernization, Livestock Facility Siting, and Agricultural Zoning.

New Technology. The adoption of new agricultural practices is controversial within the agricultural community and between the agricultural community and the general public. Faculty and staff accept the role of providing researched based information on and financial analysis of new technology practices. This information, which may place a practice in either a positive or negative light, may be unpopular with individuals or groups. Specific examples include: Nutrient Management, Genetically Modified Organisms, and Bovine Somatotropin.

Regulatory Compliance. Faculty and staff have developed strong partnerships with local and state agencies and organizations. Agencies and organizations often identify agents to carry the message and details about regulations to target audiences. The agricultural community often assumes the faculty and staff's role is larger than facilitating the communication process. Specific examples include: Premises Identification, Pesticide Applicator Training and Animal Identification.

Conflicting Interests. Faculty and staff present information regarding new technologies or best management practices that are beneficial to agricultural producers and to the environment. These practices and management practices may have an adverse financial impact on businesses that offer services and products. The faculty or staff member is then in conflict with the local agribusiness community. Specific examples include: Low Cost Dairy Rations, Nutrient Management and Non-conventional Soil Additives.