

Cornell Cooperative Extension

Role and Function of Program Advisory Committees

BACKGROUND

During their first few decades of existence most Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) associations functioned as loose confederations of the three traditional program areas: agriculture; 4H; and home economics. Each program area typically had its own advisory committee that functioned as a mini board of directors, determining not only program content and emphasis but also making decisions on staff hiring and evaluation, budget, etc. The association board of directors served to reconcile differences among the program committees.

CURRENT PRACTICE

In the organizational model utilized by Cornell Cooperative Extension associations today the board of directors employs an executive director who is responsible for the day-to-day management of the association. Overall program direction for the association is determined through plan of work and strategic planning processes led by the board of directors and executive director.

The current generic constitution for associations permits wide latitude for association boards to determine a program advisory structure. Several variations exist around the state:

- Some associations have a separate program advisory committee for each major program area. Others combine program areas (such as 4H and family issues). Some associations have one program committee covering all program areas. In some cases the board of directors acts as the program advisory committee for the association.
- In some associations program advisory committee members are elected at the same time and in the same manner as the board of directors. In other cases they are appointed.
- In a number of associations one or two representatives from the program advisory committees serve as voting members on the board of directors, along with at-large board members. In some cases the board of directors selects members who serve as liaison to the various program advisory committees.

Each CCE board of directors will need to determine an advisory committee structure that best meets its needs. Functional details about how program advisory committees (if any) are structured and operate should be contained in the association's operating guidelines.

ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY

As can be seen, program advisory committees vary widely in form and function among CCE associations. However, the role and responsibility of such committees should be relatively uniform and include:

Cornell Cooperative Extension provides equal program and employment opportunities.

- Advise the board of directors and staff on the need for and relative priority of specific educational programming within the topical area
- Provide input to the plan of work cycle
- Advise on the content, structure, and targeted audience of such programming
- Advise on marketing specific programs
- Assist with program evaluation
- Develop awareness, understanding and support for program, and represent CCE generally to the public, constituent groups, funders and public decision makers

Program advisory committees can benefit associations by:

- Helping to ensure that educational programming is aligned with local needs
- Serving as a “pool” of potential board members
- Reinforcing connections with stakeholder groups
- Providing a source of informed advocates for the association

Program advisory committees require support from the association:

- The board of directors must ensure that program advisory committees and individual committee members are representative of the issue areas the association has chosen to address, and of the diverse population of the county
- The process of identifying, selecting, and orienting program advisory committee members can be extensive, especially if members are elected
- Program committees require adequate staff support to function effectively

In summary, the main purpose of program advisory committees is to advise the board of directors and staff in planning, developing and evaluating educational programs that meet the needs of the citizens of the county. Program advisory committees should avoid getting involved in day-to-day management issues, since that is the role of the executive director under the oversight of the board of directors.