



10 Basic Steps for Maintaining Support for WSU Extension

As county governments continue to face serious budget challenges, the funding partnerships for WSU Extension offices are increasingly questioned. The actions listed below will not prevent such questioning but they will ensure support is mobilized more quickly, is more representative of the entire county, and is more successful.

Educational programming designed to address current community issues is the starting point in maintaining a strong WSU Extension presence in the county. The ten steps below are dependent on the quality and breadth of WSU Extension programming.

1. Are all staff members able to explain WSU Extension and what they do in two or three concise sentences without using abbreviations or just titles?

This may seem very basic but it is a crucial starting point. Introduce the importance of this when a new staff member is hired. Additionally, it is beneficial to practice and give each other feedback during staff meetings.

The following are examples to adapt to your own situation as well as to the person you are talking to:

I work with WSU Extension in (COUNTY)...

- *providing nutrition education for limited income families, designed to help them develop healthier lifestyles and save money;*
- *providing current research information to help improve agricultural productivity (be more specific);or*
- *working with youth and volunteers, through 4-H Youth Development and other programs, to provide leadership and citizenship opportunities for the young people in our community.*

WSU Extension is present in all 39 counties, bringing research from Washington State University to help address local issues. It is funded through a three-way partnership with county, state and federal governments.

2. Does every county commissioner know the WSU (NAME OF COUNTY) County Extension Director, some members of the staff, and program areas?

It is absolutely critical that the “knowing” be a two-way relationship. It isn’t sufficient that everyone in your office knows who the commissioners are—they need to know you on a first-name basis and know how they can look to WSU Extension as a resource.

- Immediately following the election, work with your staff to identify the commissioners and their interests; develop a strategy for getting to know new commissioners and for keeping the others informed.
- After new commissioners are elected, encourage their attendance at the WASC Newly-Elected Officials training and Certified Public Officials program. If possible the County Director should attend the training with them.
- Take every opportunity to provide information that will be helpful to them as commissioners.
- Involve commissioners in programming and events as appropriate.
- Say “thank you” for their support. Encourage the people who appreciate our programs to also say thanks to commissioners. Give the commissioners credit in every way possible.

3. Do the state representatives and senators know you and the staff and do they look to the county office as a resource for work with their constituents?

Basically the same strategy applies with legislators as with commissioners. In this era of term limits, there is likely to be a great deal of movement between the different offices (e.g., commissioners becoming legislators, term-limited legislators becoming commissioners, etc.). As a total staff, develop a strategy for regular communication with legislators. It is also important to connect with the federal legislators and their staff members.

Building strong relationships with legislative staff members needs to be viewed as a separate and critically important undertaking. One cannot assume that the staff member knows about WSU Extension just because the legislator is supportive. Staff members have tremendous responsibility and power to accomplish things. They also frequently stay in these roles for many years. In addition, many are now running for legislative seats. They are always in need of current, relevant, and easy to-use information to help in assisting constituents. They are also frequently looking for resource information and for people to serve as a “sounding board” on an issue.

4. Does the county administrator (or controller, or manager, or executive) understand the program and see WSU Extension as a resource for county government?

This is a crucial relationship that needs to be cultivated in an astute manner. It is important to learn about the nature of this position and try to understand the demands and pressures on someone in this role. Administrators usually are very appreciative of resources and information that can be used in working with commissioners and other departments.

5. Do you have a strong, diverse WSU County Extension Advisory System or Council that easily reaches into all sectors of the county?

As a publicly funded organization, it is imperative that every county office has an active, diverse WSU County Extension advisory council with members who will step forward quickly and persuasively on behalf of WSU Extension. Advisory council members help determine program priorities and evaluate program effectiveness, identify resources to support programming, and tell others about our work. The council and the Extension staff should work together to determine the strategies for communicating with policymakers. The council needs to meet periodically and members need to receive regular communications from the county office.

Bringing the diverse group of advisory council members together on a regular basis affords the opportunity for learning more fully about the diversity of WSU Extension programming. As a total staff, it is important to periodically review the list of friends/advocates and be certain that they truly represent the different sectors of your community (e.g., education, business, natural resources, agriculture etc. as well as different ethnic and social sectors).

6. Is your Web site up-to-date, reflecting current programming and priorities?

We have no idea who may be accessing our Web sites; it can no longer be viewed as an extra, something to deal with when there is time. Try to look at it from the viewpoint of someone who wants to find out about your program. If a legislative staff member, whose legislator sits on appropriations, was to look at your Web page to see if this entity called WSU Extension was worth funding, what would they see? Does the page really reflect your programming in the county? Is it always current?

Make sure you follow the WSU Extension graphic identity and branding toolkit guidelines when creating and updating your Web site. The WSU Extension Graphic Identity Program Web site will assist you with this information: <http://ext.wsu.edu/identity/>.

7. Does the county Extension office have at least one piece of material that is attractively designed, well written, and accurately explains current program priorities?

As important as it is to have a strong Web presence, it is also imperative to have a written piece that highlights WSU Extension's educational programming in the county. Look carefully and critically at the content? Does it make a strong case for continued public funding? This piece needs to be revised periodically, available to send out with other materials, distributed to policymakers, and given out at programs, etc. The county partner report offers another critically important way to tell others about WSU Extension programming in the county. The partner report contains the stories that show *why* WSU Extension makes a difference. The descriptive public relations piece briefly highlights *what* we do to assist residents, youths, businesses and communities.

Make sure you follow the WSU Extension graphic identity and branding toolkit guidelines when creating and updating public relations materials. The WSU Extension graphic identity Web site will assist you with this information: <http://ext.wsu.edu/identity/>.

8. Do all staff members work consciously and constantly to ensure that the words WSU (NAME OF COUNTY) County Extension are VERY visible (signs, mailings, materials, presentations etc.)?

This is a simple but absolutely crucial item. The funding partnership may be hard for others to understand and we need to make certain to always connect the two entities. We also need to be very visible about highlighting the county partnership.

Encourage program participants to thank county commissioners for supporting the work of Extension. Carefully examine how the phone is answered, including voice mail messages for individual staff members (WSU Extension XXX County's Master Gardener Program, NOT xxx Master Gardener program!)

Make sure you follow the WSU Extension graphic identity and branding toolkit guidelines when creating and updating signs, materials, presentations, etc. WSU Extension PowerPoint templates, signatures, and logos are located on the WSU Extension Web site:

<http://ext.wsu.edu/identity/>

9. Has the county office developed a good relationship with local media outlets?

Make sure you keep an up-to-date list of local media outlets. Build relationships with reporters by offering them reliable background information for new and ongoing stories. When appropriate, share leads for new stories. Encourage media to look to the county Extension office as an unbiased source of information. Is your Web page up to date and does it contain information that is easily accessible to reporters (and others)?

10. Do you as a staff member have at least three strong stories (at any point in time) that really explain the value WSU Extension brings to the county?

These stories are NOT just telling about a program and how many people attended it, but should reflect ongoing work within the community to address a particular issue or concern. How did research-based information make a difference? What role did WSU Extension play in facilitating a process of identifying the issue, bringing people together, gathering information, and encouraging action? Can you document the impact? Can you answer the question "so what?" These stories should be part of the county partner report; but they are also important to have as examples when talking with policymakers, the media, etc. Identifying such stories should be a regular part of staff meetings.