

Public issues are matters of widespread public concern that arise out of complex societal issues. Public issues may be broad or specific, national or local. Public issues today are vastly different from a few years ago due to diversity of populations, cynicisms, polarization, individualism, attitude about complexity and roles of elected officials.

Public issues education refers to educational programs that aim to enhance society's capacity to understand and address issues of widespread concern.

Public issues education:

- Facilitates informed decision making at the group or public level but does not try to define or create public policy.
- Is based on the premise that individuals are the most appropriate judges of their interests.
- Is consistent with the mission of the NDSU Extension Service.<sup>1</sup>
- Is an Extension activity in which scientifically generated knowledge is applied to issues of broad public concern.
- Educates citizens so that they are able to make better informed choices.
- Incorporates a variety of approaches and techniques designed for use in programs on controversial topics about which conflicts arise among individuals and interest groups.

### **The Extension Service Approach to Public Issues Education**

Extension public issues education is an interdisciplinary activity in which all Extension staff may be involved. The Extension staff must be able to work with individuals and groups with varied views but must also be independent of them; he or she must provide expertise equitably to all interested parties and not serve one side exclusively.

Extension staff must deal with

*Facts*, which are verifiable statements;

*Myths*, which are what people perceive to be true; and

*Values*, which are standards of personal desirability.

Because the resolution of public issues involves value judgments, value conflicts are to be expected. In this context Extension staff must focus on replacing myths with facts and work to create receptive minds that respect the values of all parties involved. While it is inappropriate for Extension staff to assume an advocacy role in public issues education, it is appropriate to promote and apply dispute resolution techniques that encourage collaborative problem solving and consensus building.

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<sup>1</sup> The mission of the NDSU Extension Service is to create learning partnerships that help adults and youth enhance their lives and communities.

## **Roles of Extension Staff**

Extension staff may play a number of roles in public issues education:

Content Roles – Provide information and help interpret it

- Information Provider: shares research-based facts
- Technical Advisor: assists stakeholders in sifting through the facts and interpreting what they mean in different contexts

Process Roles – Enable productive interaction among interested parties

- Convener: draws various stakeholders together in a collaborative problem-solving venture
- Facilitator: helps format meetings, sets the ground rules, with participant input, focuses attention on the decision-making process, uses consensus-seeking techniques
- Program Developer: helps develop a long-range plan for the education program and a set of short-range actions to implement the plan.

Extension staff need to carefully examine involvement in multiple roles. There are some situations in which Extension staff may not have a role in public issues education. Regardless of the role or roles being played, staff must be seen as having no professional interest or affiliation that would interfere with his or her responsibility for helping the parties resolve their dispute satisfactorily.

## **Administrative Support**

The NDSU Extension Service believes that public issues education is consistent with its mission and supports this activity for its staff. The administration also recognizes that public issues education may place Extension staff in controversial positions. No public issues education program is totally risk-free to Extension staff, but the support or involvement of advisory groups, supervisors and district directors will minimize the risk. The Extension administration will fully support well-planned and executed public issues education programs that are balanced, based on scientifically-derived information and facilitate collaborative problem solving.

The NDSU Extension Service will provide resources for appropriate in-service training for Extension staff in facilitation and conflict resolution skills; the development of educational materials; the development and fostering of linkages and information-sharing with other agencies and groups; and the acquisition and allocation of additional resources where possible.

NDSU Extension Service Public Issues Education Team includes:

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