

Getting Engaged: Resources to Support Community Engagement Practices¹

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This document is part of a series called *Getting Engaged* (https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/entity/topic/series_getting_engaged), designed to help Extension and research personnel and other community engagement professionals become capable of and comfortable with engagement with a variety of stakeholder audiences. *Engagement* generally “describes intentional, meaningful interactions that provide opportunities for mutual learning between [domain experts] and members of the public” (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2016, para. 1). For a more thorough discussion of engagement, please see the first article in this series, “Public,” *Stakeholder, and Community Engagement Practices for Researchers* (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/WC272>).

This document offers resources for practitioners at all stages, from those just beginning to think about engagement to those who have been engaging their communities for years. These resources will help you better understand your audiences and become more comfortable with interacting in a give-and-take manner, ultimately leading to engagement that is more effective at promoting behavior change outcomes.

Learning to Engage Well

You are not alone if you feel uncomfortable with the idea of interacting with non-technical audiences, those with differing education or interest levels, or all of these at once. After all, you probably know what to expect from specialist audiences in your field but not necessarily from everyone else. Try these general strategies to become more comfortable with and improve your communication and engagement.

Learn about Engagement

- Attend engagement events to observe other Extension faculty, engagement personnel, or scientists practicing engagement in the same way that you might observe another scientist teaching. Consult the IFAS Extension calendar (<https://ifas.ufl.edu/extension-calendar-events/>) for other events. “Attending” can include reading someone else’s blog in your field or watching online videos if those are the styles you want to pursue in

your own engagement. One example is [Dr. Raychelle Burks](#), an award-winning chemist and an award-winner in public engagement. Dr. Burks has appeared as a guest in a variety of podcasts and videos as well as authoring works in numerous chemistry-focused as well as general-interest publications. @DrRubidium, Burks’ Twitter account, features science, life in academia, as well as diversity and inclusion discussions. Another example is Kevin Folta, whose own podcast, *Talking Biotech* (<https://open.spotify.com/show/1OtWnZD2zhwTKsvhjWsOH8>), and Twitter, @kevinfolta, feature his thoughts as a scientist engaging in public communication

(<http://www.talkingbiotechpodcast.com/category/communication/>) along with his discussions of the science itself. Both of these practitioners offer good examples of ways to combine evidence of their own humanity and limitations as scientists alongside digestible science.

- Become a participant and attend engagement events where you feel less knowledgeable about the topic, perhaps even outside of science topics altogether. Read a blog by a researcher from a different discipline. This will allow you to experience some of the anxiety, confusion, or initial disconnection your audience might be feeling when you engage with them on your topic. Make note of those areas that you can address for your audience when engaging them with your expertise.
- Look for webinars or other resources from Ask IFAS on Education and Communication (https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/entity/topic/education_and_communication_processes), Extension Foundation’s Campus (<https://campus.extension.org/>), and other groups that study and promote engagement.
 - One publication series especially geared toward science engagement through social media is https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/entity/topic/social_media.

- For those interested in working with policymakers, see the [Evidence-Based Science Communication with Policymakers project from American University](#), the [Johns Hopkins Science Policy group](#).
 - Consider a Science Policy Fellowship with the [National Academies](#), AAAS, with [particular disciplinary focus or in particular societies](#), or in individual state governments such as [California](#).
- Participate in online and in-person professional development opportunities, as outlined in the document in this Getting Engaged series on *Improving Your Stakeholder Engagement Practices*, <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/wc274>.
- Even before you participate in a particular public engagement activity, plan what you might say. A media interview request may come at any time. Some specifics on what to prepare for include
 - Be ready to answer “So what?” – know what is meaningful to your audience.
 - Prepare vivid examples and metaphors to relate to familiar topics and provide context.
 - Especially for large (or small) numbers, be ready to give context.
 - Anticipate tough questions.

Overcome Anxiety about Public Speaking and Give-and-Take Interactions

- Sign up for Toastmasters or another public speaking group. These can be safe spaces to practice getting in front of a crowd and speaking. Most likely they will have people from a wide variety of disciplines and backgrounds all trying to work on their own speaking skills. These groups provide support for working out your analogies and explanations while overcoming other sources of nervousness.
- Take an improv (improvisation) workshop. Often aimed at budding comedians, these classes can help anyone learn to respond and react to conversational curveballs.
- Seek out workshops for improving engagement at your professional meetings or ask societies and conference organizers to host these sorts of sessions. This may be an opportunity to practice engagement in a safe space. If you cannot find this type of workshop, look to your local university and ask for them to offer such an opportunity.

Learn about Learning

Engagement is ultimately about working with people to learn about and address societal issues. Learning about people and how they think can go a long way to guiding effective engagement.

- Take university courses or online certificates, especially if you are a university employee or have continuing education employee benefits. The UF/IFAS Department of Agricultural Education and

Communication has graduate courses

(<https://aec.ifas.ufl.edu/graduate/courses/>). The Engagement Scholarship Consortium lists a variety of workshops and courses

(<https://engagementscholarship.org/professional-advancement/professional-development-opportunities>).

- See also other Ask IFAS publications outside this series, such as
 - *Building Impactful Extension Programs by Understanding How People Change* (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/wc189>)
 - *Improving Extension Program Development Using Audience Segmentation* (<https://doi.org/10.32473/edis-wc188-2014>)

Find a Group of Colleagues Who Want to Learn Along with You

A group of trusted colleagues nearby or on the internet can answer questions that you might not feel comfortable asking in other places. They can also provide feedback on your own engagement opportunities through peer observations. Finally, below are some great places to share resources as the research emerges on effective engagement.

- Join networking groups and online and in-person communities about public engagement. Some examples are
 - Engagement Scholarship Consortium (<https://engagementscholarship.org>), a group of higher education institutions dedicated to all community engagement, not just for agriscience, that meets annually
 - Advancing Research Impact in Society (<https://researchinsociety.org>), a group that works specifically to expand and share impacts of scientific research on the community
 - Trellis (<https://www.aaas.org/new-aaas-member-community>) from the American Association for the Advancement of Science (<https://www.aaas.org/>)
- Consult with UF/IFAS Communications (<https://ics.ifas.ufl.edu>) or your UF/IFAS Extension state specialists in Agricultural Education and Communication (<https://aec.ifas.ufl.edu>) and Family, Youth, and Community Sciences (<https://fyas.ifas.ufl.edu>) through in-service trainings, other workshops, and even direct office or email consultations.
 - To find personnel with relevant expertise, consider contacting the authors of these and other EDIS publications, identifying expertise through department faculty directories linked above, or searching the UF/IFAS faculty directory (<https://directory.ifas.ufl.edu>) by expertise.

- Finally, see specific topic areas on EDIS such as [Science Communication](#) and [Science Education](#).

Evaluating Your Engagement

Evaluating your engagement to ensure that you meet your goals and identify weaknesses is a crucial part of the process. Many evaluation strategies used for classroom education or other structured settings in Extension can be adapted for use in evaluating community engagement (Israel, Diehl, & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2009). However, there are also strategies that are emerging that have been designed specifically for evaluating engagement settings.

- Qualitative strategies for data gathering often work well in engagement scenarios, where people are reluctant to fill out a standard survey. Consider concept or personal meaning maps (Warner & Myers, 2006), short interviews, or even focus group feedback (Israel & Galindo-Gonzalez, 1992).
- Quantitative strategies such as surveys can collect anonymized data from a large group of participants. Offering a small incentive may make this more amenable to participants. For more specifics on quantitative strategies, see Israel et al. (2009).
- Be sure to check with UF/IFAS Extension's Program Development and Evaluation Center (PDEC, <https://pdec.ifas.ufl.edu>) for any common tools to use, especially when your engagement is in support of your Florida Extension Roadmap Initiative work group activities.
- For additional specific evaluation resources, also visit AEC's EDIS publications (https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/units/agricultural_education_and_communication).

Funding Your Engagement Activities

While funding continues to be a challenge in all educational sectors, funding for engagement is more prevalent these days because the value and effectiveness is recognized.

- Whenever you can, demonstrate proven previous effectiveness of your engagement when you write proposals for funding. This proof can be qualitative or quantitative, depending on the level of engagement you have done before and the funders' requirements for evaluation.
- Use a variety of keywords when searching for funding opportunities. Many agencies may describe your efforts as *informal or nonformal education*, *free-choice learning* (Stofer, 2015), *outreach*, *public understanding efforts*, *public engagement*, *broader impacts*, or *community engagement*. *Civic engagement* and *civic improvement* may also be appropriate.

- Partner with research projects needing to demonstrate broader impacts, and integrate your engagement funding needs into their proposals. This is most effective if you are working with these teams from the start of the development of their proposal so that the engagement is seamlessly integrated rather than appearing to be tacked on.
- Include a plan to evaluate the effectiveness of the engagement that demonstrates you are addressing the funders' goals.
- Think creatively about using the internet if your program might have broad appeal. SciFund Challenge (<https://scifundchallenge.org>) is one example of a site that helps scientists use crowdsourcing to raise funds.

Conclusion

This document offers resources for learning about engagement generally. See other documents in this series for strategies to frame your messages for particular topics and communicate risk and uncertainty.

Additional Resources

Visit the author's blog

(<https://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/aecdept/author/stofer/>) and specifically her page on public engagement resources (<https://blogs.ifas.ufl.edu/aecdept/resources-public-engagement-and-outreach/>) for updated and new resources for your public engagement work. You may also follow the author on Twitter @dr_stofer.

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