Getting Engaged: Improving Your Stakeholder Engagement Practices[1]

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This document is part of a series called *Getting Engaged* (https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/topic_series_getting_engaged), designed to help Extension and research faculty and other community engagement professionals improve their engagement with a variety of stakeholder audiences. This document provides basic information that will help faculty and other community professionals become more comfortable with engaging various stakeholder audiences. If you come from a natural or physical sciences background, have little to no social science background, and/or have not done much public engagement previously, the first document, *Getting Engaged: "Public," Stakeholder, and Community Engagement Practices for Researchers*, is designed for state and county Extension faculty or other personnel who want to get started in stakeholder engagement.

Introduction

To become comfortable interacting with people of diverse backgrounds, one should know how to engage them effectively in discussions. Discussion allows mutual consideration of the scientific information you want to share. Mutual agreement is more likely to result in behavior change. Building a relationship with your conversation partner is key, especially if that partner is someone outside your field. This allows them to see you as human rather than some disembodied "expert." The following strategies based on research about communication and engagement can be used to communicate with people well about your particular issues.

The strategies outlined in this document are aimed at engagement practices that intend to build awareness of issues and the work of researchers. However, these strategies may also be used for engagement designed to move stakeholders toward behavior change, especially when combined with tools of social marketing, such as those outlined in Ask IFAS documents on social marketing (http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/wc189) or IFAS' social marketing certificate (https://aec.ifas.ufl.edu/elearning/social-marketing/).

Understand Your Audience

As always, it is critical to start any education event or programming with an understanding of the audience and their needs. As needs change, you can refine the programming accordingly. Public engagement activities can also serve as a way to gather and update this essential information through evaluation. For more detail on conducting needs assessments, setting programming priorities, and conducting program evaluation, see Harder (2010) and Lamm et al. (2011).

Engage in a Conversation

No matter the ultimate style of engagement in which you participate, aim to treat the encounter just like any other conversation—there must be a give AND take. Understanding your audience and their needs and expectations before the experience is a vital first step. Then, throughout the experience, create and take opportunities to listen to the expertise the audience already has. Be open to letting the experience evolve from your original plan if the audience wishes. Finally, at the end, reflect on what you took away as well as what you shared. What have you learned from the experience?

Use Specific Message Frames

How you present your information, namely in what order and what context, can be just as important, if not more so, than what information you actually want to share.

- Make the problem manageable in scope with the following three methods:
  - Match the scale of the solution and the problem. Often the complex problems we work on are so large in scope that it is difficult for others to grasp. Bringing forth just one area of the issue to work on can make the road to solutions more navigable.
  - Frame the experience locally and personally. Allow the audience to find meaning and value in the problems under discussion. Local framing allows the problem to become concrete and provides an opportunity for meaningful exchanges and collaborative,

actionable problem-solving. Help your audience understand how your research affects them directly. This will help grab and keep your audience's attention throughout the entirety of the communication and motivate them to act upon the information.

- o If solutions do not emerge naturally after this framing, offer potential solutions to get the discussion started and provide hope. Then you can discuss the merits and barriers to implementing various solutions, as well as their potential to make a difference on the problem.

- Give the "so what" up front. As researchers, our presentations to peers follow a format that starts with the background to the problem. This assumes our audience already values the problem and its implications. In stakeholder engagement, this may not be the case. To make sure the audience cares about the details, start with discussing why you think it is important. You may find that your audience still does not find it important, or maybe they find it important for different reasons.

- Start by finding shared values, especially when you want to engage audiences on so-called controversial science. You may start with shared values in a less-controversial topic. For example, you could discuss the importance of providing scientific input on pest management or other aspects of agricultural production. For GMOs, explain their benefits in order to balance perceptions of risk (Ruth et al., 2016). For climate change, perhaps the shared value is desire for a healthier local environment or other benefits of a sustainable energy economy (Bales et al., 2015).

- When trying to correct alternative conceptions, do not repeat false claims. Bury these myths in the facts, or do not share the myths at all. Simply by repeating false claims, people are more likely to remember them as something they have heard over and over, in spite of their inaccuracy. In this case, you have not only failed to persuade but also perhaps further entrenched the myth. See more tips for correcting alternative information in Nyhan and Reifler (2012a, 2012b).

- Do not be afraid to share the limitations of research, including sharing stories of failure (see tip about storytelling as a method in the next section). Helping audiences make connections and better decisions in the face of uncertainty is key to public engagement. However, try to leave the encounter with some concrete steps of what we do know and what we can act on at this point.

General Styles of Communication to Engage Others

While knowledge alone often does not motivate change, knowledge is important to understand the problem. People learn best when they gather information certain ways.

- Tell stories. People remember stories far more than isolated facts. For example, for a student considering a career in your particular subject area, tell them why you are in the field and how you came to the University of Florida. What got you passionate about your work? Consider using the Working Narratives Guide for Storytelling and Social Change: https://workingnarratives.org/story-guide/ to craft stories about other issues.

- Use concrete analogies and examples whenever possible. The FrameWorks Institute has examples of research-based analogies for climate change, including the ocean as the climate's heart, circulating and regulating climate, and the osteoporosis of the sea to explain ocean acidification (Bales et al., 2015).

- Do not be afraid to admit "I don't know" if you do not, but follow up with "I can help you find the answer." After all, you can probably suggest a good resource for finding answers, including other Extension offices in your state or across the world. This could empower your stakeholder to turn to that resource more often. You can also take their contact information and follow up with an answer yourself.

- Practice engagement early and often in order to build relationships with your audience, using whichever styles of engagement work best for your audience. Make engagement more than a one-time happening. People tend to make decisions based more on relationships with people than on objective facts (Kahan, 2008), so the more that you are part of their strongest relationships, the more likely they will be to make decisions in line with what you both want. See the other documents in this EDIS series to help you practice engagement (https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/topic_series_getting_engaged).

The Art of Active Listening

Think about talking "with" someone not "to" them. Engagement can be embedded in a traditional lecture. However, ideally, engagement is more of a back-and-forth discussion and mutual sharing rather than the delivery of information. Knowledge and awareness of an issue alone is generally ineffective at motivating action (Christiano and Niemand, 2017). Also, people must listen, not only so that they can jump in and make their own points, but also so they truly understand the opinions and perspective of the conversation partner. Practice listening using communication training such as Active Listening

(https://www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/ActiveListening.htm).

Continue to Evolve Your Practice

Public engagement, like many skills, improves with practice, dedicated time, and continued flexibility. Practice, practice, practice until it becomes natural and habitual. Such engagement will become more and more integrated with your other professional work as you become more comfortable with it. Take time after each encounter to reflect—what worked? What did not? On what could you seek out more resources? Strive continually to improve, even if that improvement is just doing more engagement of a particular type. Personally, I still do not tweet or blog as much as I could, meaning I do not have a large following that stimulates conversation online and becomes true back-and-forth engagement. But I keep working on it by reading others' work, commenting and asking questions when I see the chance, and learning to use hashtags and mentions to call attention to what I have to share. Now this form of engagement is much easier for me today than when I started, and I am starting to see payback in the form of wider conversations. Of course, evaluate your engagement activities to garner valuable feedback about the audience's perspective, as described above in the section "Understand Your Audience." To find specific sources of support for particular practices, such as public speaking or unscripted interactions, see the companion publications to this one.

Weave Engagement into Your Research Scholarship

You do not have to just participate in engagement. You can partner with people who do public engagement evaluation and research to learn more about how effective your outreach is, complete reports for legislators, and contribute to scholarship on the issue. Thinking about engagement broadly also allows you to evaluate it more broadly. If you only think of engagement as the delivery of information, you will likely not think of alternative forms of evaluating beyond surveys; not every engagement opportunity has to result in increased knowledge. Many grant funding agencies are now requiring not just evidence of performing so-called broader impacts, but also thoughtful, innovative, and *effective* methods of engagement.

Promote Engagement to Others to Help Its Institutionalization

Advocate within your departments, colleges, professional societies, funding organizations, and promotion and tenure committees whenever possible to value public engagement. Set metrics for activity levels appropriate to your career stage and appointment. You could share the work you are doing in engagement with your department as an alternative to a traditional department research seminar.

Participate in Engagement Professional Development

In addition to the resources outlined here, seek out opportunities for learning in a way that suits you. There are workshops from any number of organizations from non-profits and professional scientific societies, both online and at conferences. Many universities have extensive communications offices who can help with media preparation specifically for that audience and may offer their own engagement workshops for social media and even in-person public engagement. There are also other working groups and emerging offices to coordinate community engagement. For example, the University of Florida has Cooperative Extension, but also UF/IFAS Communications, and the Office of Community Relations, with a focus on the Gainesville area. The University of Michigan offers a focus area on Public Engagement and Impact through the Vice President of Communications, an emerging initiative that is one of the first of its kind in the US.

Conclusion

Public engagement can be a rewarding, effective, and scholarly way to share research-based information with audiences beyond your typical subdiscipline. More and more, research into effective engagement can assist faculty in improving engagement and encourage continued practice. As with research itself, continuing to improve engagement practices can foster sustained involvement and continual rewards.

Additional Resources

The author updates her blog (http://kastofer.wordpress.com) with new resources and tips as she finds them. She also maintains a page with a variety of resources for public engagement and communication for researchers and practitioners (http://kastofer.wordpress.com/resources-public-engagement-and-outreach/).

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