



JOURNAL OF THE NACAA

ISSN 2158-9429

VOLUME 17, ISSUE 1 – JUNE, 2024

Editor: Linda Chalker-Scott

Orr, E.¹, Greene, E.²

¹Associate Director Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Economic Development, University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, Tucson, Arizona, 85721

²State Equine Specialist, University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, Tucson, Arizona, 85721

Increasing Legislative Support and Funding of Cooperative Extension Through Active Agent Leadership

Abstract

Many county agents acknowledge that they do not feel comfortable asking elected officials for more funding. Additionally, some agents do not celebrate the positive impacts of their programming outside of the university/extension reporting systems. It is well known that state funding of Cooperative Extension Services (CES) across the country has been stagnant. As a national aggregate, CES inflation-adjusted funding has declined 42.7% from 2008-2018. However, in Arizona, CES saw a 102% increase in funding. Arizona county extension agents played a pivotal and foundational role in shaping local, university and state priorities, which contributed to the legislative funding successes for the entire state extension system. This article explores what Arizona did and how county agents in every state can capitalize on the strengths and impact of their programs to generate support at the state and county level.

Introduction

The key to the success of Cooperative Extension Services (CES) has always been reliant on individual presence in the counties and relationships with stakeholders by county agents and specialists. At the 2024 Public and Issues Leadership Development (PILD) conference in April, every presentation in the general session addressed the importance of county agents building local and state support with their elected leaders, in order to maintain or increase extension funding. Each of the presentations was delivered by extension administrators, national extension organization presidents (including the NACAA President), and an associate director/former state legislative member (first author). Extension has always relied on state and local funding, representing two of the three primary extension funding sources (Rasmussen, 2002). A common theme in the questions/discussion portion of PILD was that agents did not feel adequately informed or prepared to initiate these types of conversations with decision makers. The purpose of this article is to provide tools to extension agents and equip them with basic knowledge and confidence to begin engaging with their elected leaders.

It has been over 100 years since the Smith-Lever Act created CES and formalized partnerships between the United States Department of Agriculture and Land Grant Universities (LGU) across the country. Over the past several decades, state legislative funding has been stagnant or declining for many extension systems across the country (Perry, 2023). The goal of the CES was (is) to take the academic scientific discoveries and disseminate that information in a format that is applicable and understandable to the agricultural audience.

In today's Extension, both the type and reach of programmatic areas, as well as the makeup of the clientele has broadened significantly from the rural and agricultural audience of yesteryear (Harder et al., 2009). Methodologies for science-based information dissemination have also expanded beyond the farm visits and interactions at the local Grange to include active and passive interaction with clientele via symposiums, clinics, workshops, peer reviewed publications, webinars, YouTube videos, eXtension, Facebook Live, Ag and 4-H Apps on smartphones, podcasts, and

more. These are additional tools for the county agent; however the essence of the job remains the same: building relationships and serving communities and individuals. The increased complexity of issues facing communities in our current environment have expanded the role and importance of CES from “traditional farming/ranching” to add family issues/dynamics, food scarcity, drug and suicide issues, and many other societal issues (Harder et al., 2009), thus necessitating an even greater need for stable, flexible, and continued funding.

Sources of funding

Cooperative Extension funding sources can be likened to a three-legged stool, combining state, federal, and local resources. Historically, 30% of the funding for CES came from the federal government and the other 70% was matched by state and local support (Rasmussen, 2002). In 1986, on average 32% of Extension funding was federal, 47% from the state government, 18% local, primarily county funding, and 3% came from the private sector (Rasmussen, 2002). Because over 66% of Extension staff are based in county offices (Rasmussen, 2002), relationships can be cultivated with lawmakers at the district level. Elected state officials work to serve the state, but always want support for their local constituents, and state governments have both the proximity and capacity to support CES. This gives state lawmakers both the incentive and potential awareness to fund CES programs which serve their local supporters while meeting statewide needs.

Flat funding with broadened expectations

From 2008 to 2018, as a national aggregate, state legislative budgets increased by 35%, but state funding targeted for land grant institutions and Cooperative Extension remained stagnant (Perry, 2023). In 2008, that funding stood at \$14.1 billion and \$987,000,000 respectively, while the numbers for 2018 funding were \$14.6 Billion and \$1,019,047,223 (Perry, 2023). This 3.2% increase over the decade is less than a tenth of the 34% inflation in the Consumer Product Index during the same period (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). For comparison, with inflation, in order for CES to have the same purchasing power as they did in 2004, CES should have been funded \$1,778,278,130 in 2018, thus creating a shortfall of \$759,230,907 or 42.7%. However,

there is extreme variation between states; while many state extensions faced funding cuts other states such as Oregon enjoyed a 59% increase in state funding during that time (Perry, 2023). County Agents have cited uncertainties with state and local funding as a serious threat to providing educational programming (Harder et al., 2009). In some cases, such as at Iowa State in the 1990's, a decline in state appropriations lead to dramatic restructuring of the CES organization and implementation of a cost-recovery policy for delivery of services (Brown et al., 2006).

Additionally, CES systems are providing services to a more diverse, urban, and ultimately; a broader set of constituents (Harder et al., 2009). This both creates stress on the CES system and the opportunity to build a broader coalition of CES supporters and constituents. This direct contact with constituents in political districts provides CES agents a powerful way to build advocates and allies in a political district (Franz and Townson, 2008). In the fight for state dollars CES must compete with schools, roads, parks, and every other budget item. Why do some Extension systems consistently have legislative support, and some don't? And more importantly, can funding success be learned and emulated from state to state?

In this environment, the county agent can be an extremely strong advocate for gaining additional support and funding (Harder et al., 2009). This is because they combine trust and relationships at the community level with scientifically supported solutions (Rasmussen, 2002). The majority of extension personnel are heavily invested in their community programs and may not realize that they can use the results, evaluations, and impacts that they collect for internal reports to be an influencer beyond their programmatic impacts. The last thing extension agents/specialists need is additional responsibilities beyond the typical weekend/night duties. However, when the best results/evaluation of extension personnel are only expressed internally to their leadership and peer evaluators, it is a missed opportunity to garner local political support. By making a directed effort to share their work impacts beyond their core audience, the county agent can document value, which may result in generating new resources from decision makers at the county and state level (Harder et al., 2009).

Methods

Influencing 101 for county agents

County agents often serve as the “face” of the university in their local area. Little things can add up to larger changes. The perception that the county agent creates extends beyond their local stakeholders to county and state elected officials, and even members of Congress. Oftentimes the county extension office is the primary or even the only university presence in the county. Extension has been labeled as the best kept secret in the state and communities (Harder et al., 2009). This can be in part because agents are overextended and highly focused on the specific group of stakeholders that they directly serve, and therefore may only share their successes with the specific group they are serving, such as ranchers, master gardeners, or 4-Hers (Franz and Townson, 2008). Small, but directed efforts can gain recognition of the impact of these successes in addition to the group directly served (Harder et al., 2009). County agents are not alone; they are part of a team representing and supported by the university.

A piece of this puzzle that can be missed is that agents are often able to incorporate the success of programmatic efforts into creating activities and products required for their academic appointments. Some examples of these include:

- writing up articles on programs (including results, evaluations, impacts) for local/state publications,
- making local, state, and national presentations on processes, purposes, outcomes of their programs, and
- using program results as preliminary data to seek grant funding to expand to larger audiences, etc.

Getting these data organized, presented to broader audiences, and published also serves to inform the stakeholders and decision makers about the good work directly impacting their constituents (Harder, et al., 2009). It is important for an agent to create a brief, but informative “elevator speech” when the opportunity to share successes arises.

When this happens, there are several Do's and Don'ts that need to be ingrained in the process.

The following list comprises best practices developed by both authors to successfully advocate for extension and stakeholder needs with state and local leaders while staying within the explicit rules and unwritten guidelines of land grant universities in multiple states. The list begins at the university level, highlighting some key steps and connections that must be incorporated into any intended "ask" by the county extension office. First, be sure that you are working closely with your extension director (at the county and state level), and that they are aware and on board with your efforts. Then, it is important to understand the intertwining influences of university, state, and local politics (Franz and Townson, 2008). There are many ingredients needed to make a successful "ask" (Tyllström and Murray, 2021), including the agendas of the university leadership, county stakeholders, the state legislature, and the Governor. County Agents play an important role and can improve their chances of legislative success by being an active advocate working in their roles at the county level and beyond. As an agent showing goodwill and educating decision makers (outside of and within the university), rather than assuming or judging, can be the difference between friendship and support or animosity and failure. Assume that everyone involved in the process cares about their community and wants to support effective and impactful programs.

The Do's

1. County Agents must understand that any type of "legislative ask" (e.g., new funding, change in policy, etc.) must include working with the university leadership/relations, local stakeholders, and the state legislature.
2. Universities always have political priorities and agendas, and if the agents' "ask" is not a part of that, it is unlikely to succeed.
3. Counties must seek to understand and find commonalities with the university president/leadership legislative priorities.
4. Look for ways to support University legislative "ask" even if they are not directly for Extension. This emphasizes that the county agents understand the big picture.
5. Agents should work with university relations to bring people from their home district to meet with a legislator.

6. The agent should engage, listen to, and work with industry stakeholder groups. These stakeholders elect the public officials and can greatly influence their legislators' decisions on funding choices.
7. The agent should study legislators' districts and the issues that they ran on and then highlight issues that CES works on that are important to the legislative member and their district.
8. Understanding of the legislators' priorities enables extension to act as a matchmaker to connect legislators with extension personnel who have expertise or programming responsibility in areas that are important to them either legislatively and/or to their district.
9. Facilitating public invitations to and recognition of elected officials at CES events/meetings, district events, such as county fairs, can strengthen relationships with those elected leaders.
10. Demonstrate collegiality by supporting non-extension university faculty and programs and by partnering with local community leaders.
11. Make sure the county "ask" has direct and obvious ties to important state issues.
12. Understand that each legislator is not an expert on each bill. They must broadly understand many state issues. Extension is able to play a valuable role by providing unbiased factual information.
13. Educate your legislators/stakeholders/universities about the impactful extension programming that is important to the constituents.
14. Realize that individual legislators tend to have 2-3 budget priorities and often they will not vote for the budget without them. Work to make extension one of those priorities.
15. Don't underestimate the influence/power of legislative staff. Work to educate and provide them with information; legislative staff can make or break a bill.
16. Be aware that the statewide budget dynamics can be sensitive and that legislators face constituent and political pressures.
17. Stakeholder support of your "ask" is critical.
18. Assume that everything that you say to one legislator will be heard by every legislator.
19. Don't say anything that you wouldn't want printed in the paper, said in an open committee or told to your university president.
20. Don't give up. It may take several legislative sessions before the CES requests make it to the top of the ranking at both the university and legislative level.
21. Agents should strategically involve extension volunteers and clients who have benefited from county programming. Often, they are our best advocates. Message and messenger are both important.

22. Agents should facilitate 4-H youth involvement in opening public meetings, such as a county board or city council (e.g., with the pledge of allegiance and 4-H pledge).
23. Working with university state relations, agents can arrange for local 4-H members and other Extension supporters to greet the Governor and/or other elected officials during official visits to their county.
24. Ultimately, with proper planning and strategy, agents have the ability to make a difference in the legislative funding decisions.

The Don'ts listed below contain some key pitfalls that can damage your reputation, your effectiveness, and potentially jeopardize your job. Steer clear of the following:

The Don'ts

1. Don't say that you speak for the entire College/University.
2. Don't ignore or try to circumvent university government relations.
3. Don't directly ask a legislator to fund a program or project without the support and permission of university government relations.
4. Don't pick sides on policy battles; stick to the peer-reviewed science, not opinion.
5. Don't over-promise or exaggerate to legislators.
6. Don't treat legislators as uneducated, or be condescending if they don't know about your specific topic/issue.
7. Never pressure or embarrass public officials.

Results and Discussion

By following the Do's and Don'ts listed above, the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension has realized outstanding success in their funding model. Funding from their state legislature has increased by over 33 times the national average (102% increase versus 3% national average) (Arizona Joint Legislative Budget Committee, n.d.; Perry, 2023) in the last decade. By employing the tactical and strategic methods used in Arizona, other states may be able to emulate this success. While the case study talks about "big picture funding success," it was truly dependent on county agents sharing their stories of impactful extension programs with decision makers at the county and state level.

CASE STUDY: How Arizona County Agents Made a Difference in CES Funding Success (2014-2022)

The results first

From 2014-2022, Arizona CES increased baseline funding by 102% (Arizona Joint Legislative Budget Committee, n.d.). Additionally, during the 2022 and 2023 legislative sessions, CES received an additional \$49.8 million beyond baseline funding directly from the state budget for Extension to administer programs ranging from agricultural workforce development and law and policy education, to on-farm water irrigation conservation (Arizona Joint Legislative Budget Committee, n.d.).

Arizona keys to success – know the rules and players

Arizona County Extension Agents knew their community and played a pivotal role in guiding university leadership in working with local leaders. Agents educated both university and state leaders about county and regional issues by inviting them to important county events. Some specific examples include:

1. Yuma County 4-H Ambassadors greeted the Governor and demonstrated the skills that they learned in 4-H by presenting community projects (e.g. livestock, wetland restoration, healthy living, etc.),
2. The state extension horse specialist educated the USDA/NIFA Director and others about the impactful rancher training programs implemented in partnership with tribal extension agents,
3. Pima County Family Consumer Health Services (FCHS) agents educated legislative members on successful prison education and re-entry programs, and
4. Maricopa and Pinal County Agricultural and Natural Resources (ANR) agents and specialists testified on implementation of research-based integrated pest management (IPM) at schools and in crop production. As a trusted source of information in their community the County Agent helped explain and demonstrate the importance of funding Cooperative Extension to university, county, and state leaders.

One of the keys was to identify and honor the rules (sometimes unwritten), all of the players (university, government, stakeholders, etc.), and the politics at the university and the state levels that can impact funding decisions. In the University of Arizona course “US/Arizona Constitution and Government” (taught by E. Orr, 2001 to present) students are taught the legislative process, including passing bills, the budget, and the informal rules that govern the legislative process. That information was used to help Arizona Cooperative Extension strategize to create an effective “ask” and successfully work through the process which resulted in additional funding. In Arizona, Cooperative Extension is housed at the University of Arizona in the College of Agriculture, Life, and Environmental Sciences. For the Arizona CES to even consider an "ask" to increase state funding, both the university president and the Arizona Board of Regents had to give their blessing. These entities receive requests for funding from every college and program at the University of Arizona and gaining support is very competitive. However, both the University President and the Board of Regents must be supportive of the “ask” before it can be presented to the state government.

Arizona: the power of one legislator

In Arizona during the 2022 (Republican Governor) and 2023 (Democratic Governor) legislative sessions, the Republican-controlled House and Senate passed the state budget. During those two years, a single house legislator was the primary driving force behind funding the Arizona CES \$45.2 million for an on-farm irrigation and research program (Arizona Joint Legislative Budget Committee, n.d.). That legislator made such a concerted effort because it was important to their district and to their key constituents.

On the other hand, in 2015, the first author was tasked with securing funding from the state legislature to start a new College of Veterinary Medicine. The funding was successful, but initially faced fierce opposition both from conservative Republicans and urban Democrats. After working with stakeholders at the legislative district level, eventually there was almost unanimous support to fund a new College of Veterinary Medicine. This was done district by district, legislator by legislator, with one strong opposing legislator voice who was finally won over (see *Both message and messenger matter* below).

Understanding your process

In your state, it is important to understand that “your ask” will be in direct competition with a multitude of others from within your university and that if university approval is obtained, the work and politics will have just begun. At the state level, two things need to occur: general legislative goodwill coupled with one or two legislators who will make the funding request one of their top priorities. Legislators must make budget choices in context (Tyllström and Murray, 2021). When funding a single line item such as Cooperative Extension, it is not a binary yes/no. Since the budget is finite, legislators must choose between dozens of competing interests (Should I fund CES...or roads or K-12 Schools?). Cooperative Extension must rank high to make the final budget.

Many state legislators across the nation will heartily support their state extension programs at meetings, in speeches, public settings, and beyond, but the monies never materialize. That is because unless there is a specific, well prepared, and tangible funding request presented in writing for programs and positions from the university to the legislators, they have nothing to fight for on your behalf. This is a key point that is often missed.

Know your strengths

Politically, at the state level, CES derives its powers from proximity, credibility, and scope (Rasmussen, 2002). Cooperative Extension Services are uniquely able to play an important role in addressing state issues because they are ubiquitous in terms of geography, issues, and scientific scope. They build trusted relationships and research-based solutions to individuals and communities, identifying the concerns of elected officials in their districts (e.g., drug abuse, fires and floods, workforce, etc.). They can identify extension agents and programs that are already addressing, perhaps indirectly, the issues (e.g., 4-H Youth Development, forest health, ag education and apprenticeship). Education on these programs is a good place to begin establishing conversations that can lead to relationships with elected officials.

How Arizona effectively utilized educational opportunities

Arizona 4-H members were brought to the Capital during the legislative session. They were provided a tour and education around the legislative process, inviting their local legislator to lunch to talk to the group about their job/role in making positive changes for Arizona. Then the legislator introduced the 4-H group to the House and Senate, the 4-H members led the pledge of allegiance, and the legislator cited the positive benefits of 4-H to the state. Members of 4-H informed legislators that youth involved in 4-H were less likely to use drugs and more likely to attend college. This achieved the dual educational action of informing our youth, engaging them in the legislative process, and educating the politicians about the value of CES's proactive role in youth development. This type of activity is something that can be duplicated in any state with youth, farmers/ranchers, Master Gardeners, etc.

Additionally, extension experts can be a proactive part of bringing science to the legislative process. In Arizona, CES Irrigation specialists were identified as unbiased experts with no financial or business agenda. As a result, they were invited by the Arizona House Speaker and house leadership to help draft the bill language that ended up funding \$45.2 million for on-farm irrigation programs and research. The budget and the bill language are what drives policy, and because of existing relationships and trust, CES was invited to the table to shape both the bill and budget.

Both message (“ask”) and messenger (client/stakeholders) matter

Legislators listen to district constituents (Tyllström and Murray, 2021), so when CES is actively engaged with local and state constituents, those groups and individuals can provide support and a voice to the legislature about the impacts of CES. In 2022, Arizona cattle growers and individual farmers stepped up and directly advocated to increase CES funding. The credibility and perceived neutrality of industry groups and independent stakeholders can be more effective than direct advocacy from the organization (Tyllström and Murray, 2021). In the Arizona case it was the deciding factor in CES receiving a baseline funding increase of 42% in a single legislative session (Arizona Joint Legislative Budget Committee, n.d.).

Arizona - turning opposition into advocacy

In 2015, the first author was tasked by the university president to obtain state funding to start a new College of Veterinary Sciences. During this process, an influential legislator in the state house opposed all university funding (specifically the Veterinary School) because he believed that any dollar taken from the private sector for the government (including University of Arizona) was a waste of money. Cooperative Extension identified constituents in his district who had benefited from extension education/programs. Opportunities were created for the constituents to share their story with the elected representative. As a result, he moved beyond his personal ideological beliefs and began to support identified district needs. For example, the Western Growers, Arizona Farm Bureau, and Arizona CES partnered to host two events that resulted in support of both the Veterinary School and the University. Both events were hosted in the legislator's district, the first was in a large agricultural community, where every grower explained that supporting the University of Arizona helped build their workforce and was a key to profitability. At the second event, over 100 farmers explained the value of Extension to their operations. Once the representative saw that his constituents saw the direct value of CES in his district, he became a champion for university funding, even becoming a key sponsor of the bill to fund the new College of Veterinary Science. These events happened because of the relationship between the local county agents and farmers in the district.

Conclusion

The bottom line - what an agent needs to know

A budget reflects the state's true priorities and passing that budget requires the support of the governor and a majority of both legislative chambers. Understanding the mechanisms of power in each area is the key to increased funding. Like a fulcrum or a lever, the power of a single legislator when they are the deciding vote is beyond enormous. Without the support of a majority of individual legislators, legislative leadership cannot pass a budget or a bill. Ultimately, there are three numbers that matter most; the votes needed to pass the House, the Senate, and the Governor.

While CES needs most legislators to like us, the key is to have champions who will fight for us. Cultivating champions involves a great deal of commitment over time, understanding the legislator's districts and being able to speak to the issues that interest them, or framing your issue to ignite their interest. Across the country, Cooperative Extension's story is worth being told and our programs are worthy of funding. It is up to us to understand the rules of the games and play in such a way as to continue to make our communities and states a better place for all.

The primary storyteller at the local level in all of this will always be the county agent. They know their community, the needs, and issues, and are often the most trusted part of the university by their local stakeholders. This article is intended to be a guide to help extension personnel understand their power and influence and the impact they can have beyond their programmatic specialty. In addition, the agent can expand the impact of programmatic successes by utilizing data/impacts beyond the internal evaluation processes for informing and strengthening support of stakeholders and constituents.

This article is intended to help any county agent understand the process and pitfalls of working with elected officials. This includes identifying and capitalizing on existing extension programs that also address the needs and concerns of elected officials and their constituents. For example, in Arizona, a county school superintendent was discussing the ineffectiveness of funded anti-vaping programs. The extension administrator shared the positive impacts that 4-H youth development provides to 8-18 year olds. As a result, that county extension office will receive new funding to support 4-H programming. When you understand the power that one conversation can have, you realize that it is worth your effort.

Literature Cited

Arizona Joint Legislative Budget Committee. n.d. *Prior Years Budgets*. Accessed on January 14, 2024 <https://www.azjlb.com/prior-years/>

Brown, P.W., D.M. Otto, and M.D. Quart. 2006. A new funding model for Extension. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 11(2): 101-116.

Franz, N.K., and L. Townson. 2008. The nature of complex organizations: the case of Cooperative Extension. *New Directions for Evaluation* 2008(120): 5-14.

Harder, A., A. Lamm, and R. Strong. 2009. An analysis of the priority needs of Cooperative Extension at the county level. *Journal of Agricultural Education* 50(3): 11-21.

Perry, G.M. 2023. Cooperative extension, experiment station, and Land Grant Universities: Competitors or partners for state funding? *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy* 45(2): 947– 969. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aepp.13251>

Rasmussen, W.D. 2002. *Taking the University to the People: Seventy-five Years of Cooperative Extension*. Purdue University Press.

Tyllström, A., and J. Murray. 2021. Lobbying the client: The role of policy intermediaries in corporate political activity. *Organization Studies* 42(6): 971-991.

United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. n.d. *CPI Inflation Calculator*. Accessed on January 27, 2024. https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm