

# Building the Extension Council

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Election committees chart the future of the Extension program through the candidates they select. The committee's work represents one of the more important responsibilities of the council. Election committees start that work by considering who should be on the council.

## Who is Needed?

Today, it is generally accepted that council members should have diversity in perspectives and experiences. This provides broader discussions, consideration of a number of alternatives and better decisions. Each person's background will shape his or her contributions to the discussions. At the same time, however, the central concern should be for a shared sense of mission on the council.

Extension council candidates should represent various age groups, races, locations throughout the county and city, programs in University Extension, both men and women and special skills such as fund raising, public relations and administration. The first job for the election committee is to use the matrix with this guide to identify how well continuing members represent various categories judged to be essential. The same matrix then can be used as new candidates are suggested. Extension council members and staff should be asked for their suggestions for candidates prior to an election committee meeting.

One word of caution regarding diversity on councils: In order to achieve diversity, some councils will decide to simply enlarge a council. Larger councils are rarely more effective. They often become diffused and uncoordinated, developing an "inner" council as the active functioning center of control. Councils should be small enough to act as a deliberative body and large enough to carry out the necessary responsibilities.

The number of elected positions on councils are set by law with a minimum of 10 people and a maximum of 20. The number of appointed positions will depend on the number of farm organizations and towns in the county.

Changing election district boundaries can be a useful tool in achieving diversity and representation. CPDs can provide information on how this is done.

## Who Will Serve?

Discussions on possible council candidates often include conversations where someone says: "Mary would be good, but I doubt if she will do it." If Mary would be good, she should be asked to serve, regardless of the perception of whether or not she would serve. People join councils for many reasons, and it is difficult to determine what might affect their decision. People may join for personal enrichment, fun, prestige, nostalgia, sentiment, friendships and personal associations, opportunities for business, professional and social contacts, desire for change and social involvement, honor, privilege, psychic rewards, visibility and societal recognition, the challenge of governance, and the feeling of accomplishment. If a good candidate is suggested, recruit them.

# What Do You Say?

Training of the new council member actually begins the moment the election committee member contacts the candidate. Therefore, the invitation should never be hurried or casual. The invitation should be a clear, concrete presentation of the work of the council, the major problems it faces, the general responsibility of a council member and the particular role the candidate is expected to fulfill. If the committee has done its work properly, it will know precisely why it is asking a person to join the council. The special skills and background the person has to contribute should be mentioned. The guide on Organizing Committees has additional information on identifying and recruiting candidates.

Occasionally, a candidate will be told the council will not take up much of their time, they will only need to come to a few meetings and they can miss if they need to. This places council activity in the wrong light. If these statements are true, the council cannot be very important; if they are false, the new council member begins his or her service with a misconception. It is important to tell how many full council meetings will be held and how long they last. Committee responsibilities; the number of committee meetings; training opportunities, and the time commitment they require should be outlined.

## Keeping New Members

As soon as the person is elected, formal introduction to the council begins. The importance of effective orientation to a council is well known but not frequently done. It takes time to accomplish, and an extension council might want to delegate orientation responsibilities to the election committee and Extension staff. Some of the more widely used methods of introducing new council members to their responsibilities are listed below. A council can choose whatever methods are best for its situation.

1. Immediately after election, the council member should receive a welcome and offer of assistance from both the council chairman and CPD. The welcome may be a personal visit, telephone call, or letter.
2. Training sessions may be held for new council members. A common mistake is to crowd too much information into a training meeting. The best procedure is to have a meeting, focused on the essential facts and principles of the council; to schedule it for a period short enough to permit interest to be sustained; and to make certain that the social environment is open and welcoming. At this meeting, a packet of materials describing the institutions may be given to the new members. The packet might include the council manual, the latest annual report and budget, an organizational chart of the staff, descriptions of programs and a set of minutes for the past year.
3. Some councils might want to schedule a later orientation conference after new members have had a few months of experience and are better equipped to raise questions.
4. Experienced members sometimes act as a sponsor for new members, making sure they have information they need, are introduced to other council members and have someone to turn to with questions. This also gives the sponsor a re-education.
5. Some councils arrange an informal occasion for entire council to meet new members and county staff. A social affair permits new people to become acquainted with their future associates.
6. Councils should continue to introduce themselves through answers to roll call and meeting icebreakers when appropriate. Name tags or nameplates set in front of council members during the meeting will also help new members. Learning names takes several introductions, and learning about members'

backgrounds, interests, and special contributions to the council takes even longer.

7. New council members should see the physical facilities in use. This visit will be of great help in understanding the program and in giving the new member a sense of the operating situation. Even when a new council member believes she or he knows the physical facilities well, she or he may have seen them with vision slanted by a previous role.
8. An effective method of introducing a new member is to give them a job to do. Actual participation is the surest stimulus to interest and personal involvement. A task for a new council member should be something that the new member wants to do or has pleasant aspects; it should not be too arduous or demand too much detailed knowledge; it should be carried on in association with other council members; and it should be an activity for which the new member can be given recognition.
9. Some new members may want to learn in depth about the issues confronting the organization. They should be provided literature about adult education, environmental issues, funding, etc.
10. Interaction with council members from other counties may help new members understand Extension.