



University of Wisconsin-Extension
432 North Lake Street
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October 31, 2003

To: John Attig, Environmental Sciences Department Chair
Malcolm Brett, Director, Wisconsin Public Television
James Fanta, Ag/AgBusiness Department Chair
Faden Fulleylove-Krause, Family Development Department Chair
John Lund, Labor Education Department Chair
Jack Mitchell, Educational Communications Department Chair
Sue Pleskac, Youth Development Department Chair
Greg Schnirring, Director, Wisconsin Public Radio
Geoff Wendorf, Community Resource Development Department Chair

From: Gloria Green, Chair, Academic Staff Council
Karen Joos, Chair, University Committee & Faculty Senate
Kevin Reilly, Chancellor
Marv Van Kekerix, Vice Chancellor and Provost

Subject: Engagement and Controversy

Attached for your consideration is a draft concept paper on the subject of University Engagement and Controversy: The Professional Roles of UW-Extension Faculty and Staff.

This draft paper was developed as the result of conversations with the University Committee, the Faculty Senate, the Academic Staff Council, and the Executive Council. The paper is short and represents only very preliminary, rough draft thinking on the subject, as you'll see.

The Extension governance bodies and Executive Council believe that an institution-wide conversation on this subject now might serve several very useful purposes:

- Ensure that our thinking on this difficult and complex subject is current, and place it within the context of "The Engaged University" movement.
- Enable departments and units in Extension, which we acknowledge right up front will likely approach this topic differently, to benefit from the thinking on the subject in other departments and units across the institution.

- Help orient less experienced faculty and staff across Extension, and for that matter the rest of us, into the public context in which we do our work.
- Help develop a common language about, and deeper understanding of, the roles extension educators play and the value of those roles in meeting our common mission.
- Place UW-Extension at the forefront of a national dialogue about the public roles of the public university in the 21st century.

The strong advice from our governance groups and the Executive Council was to situate this conversation in the academic departments and broadcast units and to ensure full participation of both faculty and academic staff so that we could bring together the best current thinking of our practitioners from within the disciplines and environments in which they work. Governance body members and Chancellor's cabinet members believe this approach will ensure that our effort will be very much a "bottom up" rather than "top down" enterprise. We strongly agree with this attitude, and very much want this effort to be grounded firmly in your conversations on the topic with colleagues in your academic department or unit.

We recognize also that within the departments and units there has been much good work done already regarding our approach to academic freedom, editorial integrity, fairness, and the other elements that comprise any approach to university engagement and controversy. We hope you will build on previous efforts and bring them to bear in service of our colleagues across the wider institution.

Because we know full well that this is a significant assignment for those of you we are asking to facilitate it, Rita Sears will be arranging a meeting for us so that we can discuss the approach to it that is outlined in the attached concept paper. We are more than open to adjusting the process suggested as a result of our conversations at that meeting. We believe that meeting will be interesting also because it will provide many of us an opportunity to talk with each other around a vital topic in a way that we suspect those conversations have not been able to happen in the past.

We understand that the process we are asking you to embark on is one that certainly has its dangers. There will be disagreements about how to approach engagement and controversy within our own institution. Our individual department and unit articulations of our stance on university engagement and controversy, as well as any umbrella institutional statement on it we may choose to put forward, may not be met with universal acclamation inside or outside UW-Extension. We believe that none of that should stop us from looking into a fundamental question that underlies all our work: just how should the University bring its resources to bear on the most important and difficult issues of the day?

In addressing that question, we stand on the shoulders of giants in the University of Wisconsin, among them the Regents who proclaimed in 1894:

Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere, we believe that the great state University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found.

We look forward to winnowing and sifting our way through this issue with you.

Copy: Extension Faculty Senate
Extension Academic Staff Council
Extension Executive Council
Pat Ludeman, Chair, Cooperative Extension Committee on
Academic Staff Issues



DRAFT
10/31/03

**University Engagement and Controversy:
The Professional Role of UW-Extension Faculty and Staff**

Background

The mission of the University of Wisconsin-Extension, to make the resources of the University available to people wherever they live and work, often places Extension faculty and staff in the middle of the most pressing issues facing Wisconsin residents. That often means Extension professionals find themselves in the midst of controversy, and can be accused by one side or another of “taking sides” in a way that moves us out of our role as educators, journalists, and facilitators, toward more of a role as advocates, or even active interveners in disputes.

One could argue that our own Wisconsin Extension history and traditions, along with our job functions and the current national emphasis on engagement by University personnel in community and state needs and challenges, makes our positioning along a spectrum of these various roles inevitable. How do we decide what the appropriate boundaries are in this environment for educators and public broadcasters who are looked to by the public to provide them with objective, research-based information that will assist them in making good decisions and improving their quality of life?

Addressing the Issue

We might approach that question in light of our current attitudes toward a number of the values and qualities around which the debate over our role often takes place:

- Academic freedom
- Editorial integrity
- Neutrality
- Advocacy
- Accuracy
- Balance
- Bias
- Fairness
- Objectivity.

Initial conversations with the University Committee, the Academic Staff Council, and senior administrators in UW-Extension indicate that it would be useful and timely for the academic departments and operating units, each of which may have its own approach to the issue of engagement and controversy, to articulate its approach clearly. Each department and unit is asked to develop a short philosophical statement embodying its culture and practices with regard to the issue, along with several examples that apply the principles of the philosophical statement to prototypical situations in which faculty and staff find themselves. These examples could demonstrate both appropriate and inappropriate applications of the principles in real world situations.

The department and unit leaders are responsible for producing the philosophical statements and examples, consulting with their respective colleagues. These statements and examples will then be exchanged among the department and unit leaders, and circulated for discussion among faculty and staff governance and advisory groups and Extension administration. Based upon comments received in this thorough consultation process, the department and unit heads will revise the statement and examples as necessary, and develop

from them an overall UW-Extension statement on the issue intended to serve as a preface to the individual department and unit statements and examples.

This institutional statement will also be widely vetted by faculty and staff governance and advisory groups and administration, and revised by the department and unit heads based upon comments received. The entire document will then be submitted to the Chancellor's office for final approval and dissemination.

Conclusion

If the engagement ideal is to be taken seriously by universities nationally, the questions we will grapple with in this process and the ways we devise to address them will be of interest not only to Extension and the rest of the University of Wisconsin faculty, staff, and administration, but to universities and their stakeholders across the country. Given our rich tradition in the University of Wisconsin of inquiring into and articulating the appropriate ways for the University to "winnow and sift" its way to the truth, we have the potential to make a real contribution to shaping the identity of engaged public universities in America in the 21st century with this work.