

Neutral Brokers of Information

Maybe the trickiest and potentially most dangerous pitfall of outside collaboration in SGE outreach programs is that of advocacy. The SGE ideal of being a neutral source of science-based information is very difficult to achieve in actual practice. Working in close connection with a client group can easily lead to identification with that group's point of view. It is a problem that has and always will exist in SGE.

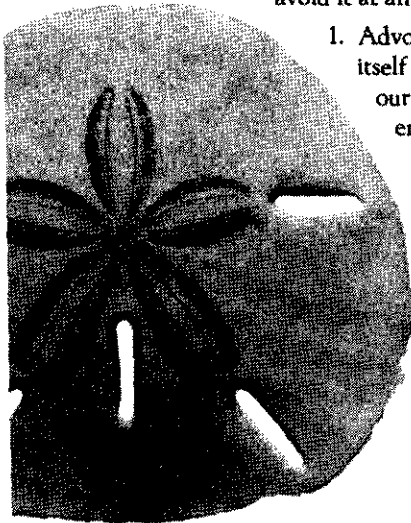
Every SGE agent, specialist, and leader has personal views about the issues we deal with in our jobs. It goes without saying that we should all strive to set these aside in the conduct of our programs. SGE also has a bias, or institutional agenda. But as neutral providers of science-based information to decision makers, we do not suggest what those decisions should be. We help them understand their choices and the implications of those choices. We do not take positions on issues of public debate. It is important for our collaborators to know this. It is equally important for us to be aware of their particular agendas.

Arguably, the most important asset of SGE is its credibility as an objective source of scientific information. As Bruce Wilkins pointed out in *Views on Sea Grant Advisory Service Work* (1980), "[SGE] workers are frequently tempted to take on the role of advocate. Urging people to take a particular action or adopt a particular idea, although alluring, should generally be avoided in [SGE] work."

There are at least four reasons advocacy can be so seductive.

1. The advocate gains support. Taking a position naturally wins favor among those who agree with the position.
2. Advocacy is easy to do. Taking a position doesn't require all of the facts or even a full understanding of the situation.
3. Advocates may be seen to be more helpful. Answering the "should we?" question helps the questioner carry the burden of the decision.
4. More can be achieved in a shorter time. Advocating a single solution rather than fully examining the advantages and disadvantages of several alternatives makes it possible to move toward a solution more quickly.

Although advocacy can be seductive, there are many reasons SGE professionals avoid it at all costs.



1. Advocacy of one position alienates those on the other side(s). That in itself may not be bad (after all, they may be wrong!), but we may lose our credibility with those clients who in good faith come to a different decision. There are few absolutes in much of science, and none in matters of public policy.
2. We—SGE—don't know the proper decision. The improbability of knowing with certainty the value of change to any individual or group means that we can seldom say what decision is best for someone else.
3. Research is not needed for advocacy. This is, of course, the flip side of "advocacy is easy to do." Exhortation, misinterpretation, and misrepresentation are all techniques frequently used in strong advocacy situations. Indeed, science-based information can often be an impediment to an emotional advocate's role.

4. We lose objectivity. Rejecting research findings that conflict with a given position, and even distorting research to generate desired results, has historically been problematic for groups or individuals who are advocates.
5. We are blamed for failure. If an idea that we advocate is adopted and fails, we receive, and deserve, the blame for its failure.

Effective SGE professionals avoid the trap of advocacy by striving to provide the best information available while recognizing that the persons who will benefit, or lose, must make the decisions.

What Can Happen

The following real example illustrates problems that can arise when SGE professionals assume a role of advocacy, or in this case, are perceived as advocates. In the late 1970s, a new SGE program was established in an East Coast state. The program had recently employed a fisheries extension agent and an SGE program leader, who had begun discussions about educational programming with leaders of a commercial fishing association. About one week into the job, the association president requested that Sea Grant help with a meeting they were planning to discuss the future of fisheries management in the state. Wanting the association's support, the agent quickly agreed to assist with the meeting, to be listed as a co-sponsor, and to place posters about the meeting at fish houses around the state. The SGE program leader also offered the local county extension office as the location for the meeting. The meeting was subsequently held, and more than 100 fishermen and the television media attended. As it turned out, the fishermen used the meeting to berate the state fisheries management agency and a new fisheries management structure that had been developed by the state over several years. The press was very detrimental to the state, and by the next morning, the governor's office and the state fisheries director were angrily calling the SGE office. Some years later, the SGE program leader found out that a meeting convened in the governor's office that very day to discuss what the state could do to eliminate the SGE program. What went wrong?

With almost all public issues there are different perspectives from a variety of constituents. In this case, the fishermen's association had legitimate concerns about the impending legislation, and their concerns deserved a public forum. However, Sea Grant made several major mistakes. The most important was that the meeting was not balanced among differing points of view. The state fisheries agency (and other fisheries groups that supported the legislation) should have had equal time on the program to express their views. By listing Sea Grant as a co-sponsor on the meeting flyer, it was perceived that Sea Grant (and the university) tacitly endorsed the association's opinion. In addition, as a meeting co-sponsor, it was Sea Grant's responsibility to make sure that the planning for the meeting was properly balanced. The bottom line was that Sea Grant did receive kudos from the association, but it quickly made enemies with the other parties that also had legitimate opinions on the issue.

This example illustrates how extension professionals can find themselves in a conflict, or wishing they could help ameliorate its effects. Conflict resolution skills may prove valuable for program leadership in these instances, and effective training in technique may be an aid to addressing the needs of stakeholders.

Cooperative Extension

As mentioned in the section "Administrative Structure" (pages 13–17), Sea Grant is based on the land-grant model of the Cooperative Extension System (CES). Approximately two-thirds