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Developing and Managing an Advisory Board to Support Extension-Based Centers and Other Programs

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Abstract

Subject matter centers—which emphasize time-bound, externally funded, deliverable-driven projects and teams that engage new stakeholders—are becoming more common in Extension. An important element of such a center is an effective advisory board. This article presents a multifaceted process undertaken by the William D. Ruckelshaus Center as an example of the successful development and use of an Extension-based subject matter center advisory board. Extension-based centers, and other Extension offices and programs, can adapt the practices described to their own situations and tap the expertise and influence of leaders in their areas to address challenges and expand their capabilities, insight, and reach.

Keywords: advisory boards, board governance, subject matter centers, public policy, collaborative governance

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Subject matter centers have long been vehicles for applied, multidisciplinary research and practice at universities (e.g., Bozeman & Boardman, 2003; Ikenberry & Friedman, 1972; Stahler & Tash, 1994). Such centers are becoming more common within Extension. The William D. Ruckelshaus Center (Ruckelshaus Center)—a joint effort of Washington State University (WSU) and the University of Washington (UW) that fosters collaborative public policy—is one of four such centers affiliated with the WSU Extension Community and Economic Development Program.

Guidance on developing and managing an advisory board, a council, or a committee for traditional county-office-based Extension programming has long been available (e.g., Black, Howe, Howell, & Bedeker, 1992; Cole, 1980; Ebling, 1985; Gamon, 1987). But that guidance is several decades old, and little has been provided regarding using an advisory board to accomplish the somewhat different goals of an Extension-based subject matter center, which center on time-bound, externally funded, deliverable-driven projects and teams that engage new stakeholders as compared to traditional programs' focuses on dedicated staff, consistent activities and

stakeholders, and longer-term, internal funding (Gaolach, Kern, & Sanders, 2017). This article benefits both subject-matter centers and traditional Extension programs by describing how development and management of the Ruckelshaus Center's advisory board has supported achievement of those goals.

Background

The Ruckelshaus Center was founded in 2004. Its mission is to act as a neutral resource for collaborative problem solving in the State of Washington and the Pacific Northwest (William D. Ruckelshaus Center [Ruckelshaus Center], 2016). Scholars and practitioners refer to this field as collaborative governance, among other terms (e.g., Ansell & Gash, 2008; Dukes, 1996; Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2012). The center has helped resolve challenges and conflicts involving natural resources, disaster response, health policy, economic development, good governance, and other concepts (Hall & Kern, 2017; Kern, 2013).

The center is guided by an advisory board of prominent local, state, and regional leaders who represent a broad range of constituencies and geographic locations. The advisory board provides guidance, advice, perspective, credibility, prestige, access, balance, and other benefits valuable to the Ruckelshaus Center in maintaining a reputation for neutrality and effectiveness. Although the advisory board is tailored to the center's public policy focus, there is much about how the center designed and uses its advisory board that can be instructive to other university-based subject matter centers, as well as traditional Extension offices and programs.

Structure and Governance

The board was established by the WSU and UW presidents, who are responsible for appointing its chair. The chair appoints a vice chair and a governance subcommittee, which brings recommended nominations to an executive committee. The chair invites and appoints new board members on the basis of this input.

There is no set number of members, but the board guidelines call for the board to "collectively bring balance, neutrality, and a statewide perspective resulting from a variety of backgrounds and interests" (Ruckelshaus Center, 2015, p. 1). Full board members (serving staggered, renewable 3-year terms) are joined by "ex-officio seats for presidents, provosts and deans/vice presidents of the respective universities, and for one Democrat and one Republican from both the Washington State Senate and Washington State House of Representatives" (Ruckelshaus Center, 2015, p. 2).

Committees

Meeting these requirements necessitates a large board (42 members as of December 2017), so smaller groups of board members advise the center more frequently and in more depth through a committee structure that includes executive, development, and communications committees, in addition to others formed as needed. Committee members are appointed by the chair, in consultation with the center's director.

The board guidelines call for the executive committee to "take an active role in the Center's strategy and activities, and serve as a sounding board/set of key advisors for the Director" (Ruckelshaus Center, 2015, p. 4). This committee (which includes the chair, vice chair, governance subcommittee, deans of the host units, and several other board members) meets five times per year, receiving reports and offering advice on current projects, potential projects, and major administrative considerations.

The development committee "is responsible for establishing and executing a plan for Center resource development that results in a balanced portfolio of funding sources" (Ruckelshaus Center, 2015, p. 5). Tapping

the network, knowledge, expertise, and influence of these committee members has allowed the center to raise funds at a level otherwise difficult for a center, office, or program to achieve.

The board guidelines describe a communications committee that is "responsible for helping the Center develop and implement an outreach strategy" (Ruckelshaus Center, 2015, p. 5). That committee was active in the center's early years, creating logos, stationery, a website, and other elements of the center's "brand."

Beyond the executive, development, and communications committees, the chair may establish other committees or task groups as needed. These include "disappearing task forces" convened to address specific projects.

Board Meetings

The center holds two full board meetings per year, one in Seattle (where its main office is located) and one in another part of the state. This practice of paying attention to and getting to know an entire service area is one that other centers, offices, and programs may find important to replicate. Each board meeting is designed to resemble a mini-symposium. Center "business" is kept concise, with most of the day devoted to discussion among board members and invited guests on a special topic. Using this strategy keeps members energized about participation on the board.

Neutrality

Neutrality is a key quality of the Ruckelshaus Center. Board members are directed to distinguish between when they are speaking for themselves or the organizations they represent (when it is assumed they will take positions) versus when they are speaking in their capacities as board members (when they are expected to refrain from taking positions and instead emphasize the center's neutrality).

Strategies for Overcoming Challenges Common to Subject Matter Centers

The Ruckelshaus Center has been able to overcome certain challenges commonly grappled with by Extension-based subject matter centers and programs. Essentially, the center's success in this area has hinged on how its advisory board was developed, how it is structured, and how it functions. Table 1 provides examples to illustrate this point.

Table 1.

Importance of the Ruckelshaus Center Advisory Board's Structure and Function in Addressing Challenges Common to Extension-Based Subject Matter Centers

Challenge	Solution
Gaining access to subject matter leaders and decision makers; maintaining a reputation for neutrality	Establishing a large board featuring prominent and credible members who collectively represent a wide range of sectors, geographies, and political perspectives
Ensuring involvement and support from university and political leadership	Creating ex officio memberships for university presidents, provosts, vice presidents, and deans and for representatives of both chambers and

	parties in the State Legislature
Benefitting from regular advice and guidance from a manageably sized body	Establishing an executive committee from a subset of board members to meet regularly and offer advice on projects and major administrative issues
Achieving financial sustainability	Establishing a development committee from a subset of board members to meet regularly and fund-raise in support of the center's mission
Maintaining a good balance of interests and healthy turnover on the board	Establishing a governance subcommittee from the executive committee to seek, track, vet, and nominate new members
Creating a "brand" and identity	Establishing a communications committee to create logos, stationery, a website, messages, etc.
Taking on special projects; addressing short-term needs	Enabling ad hoc or "disappearing" board task groups
Keeping board members informed and engaged without making the time commitment prohibitive so that they will remain active and committed to the center's/program's success	Holding two board meetings per year, with center "business" kept concise so that the focus can be on discussion and interaction around special topics of interest; providing comprehensive information in meeting packets; sending monthly update emails between meetings
Knowing, and being known by, the center's/program's entire service area	Rotating board meeting locations across the state; including community breakfasts

Conclusion

Among the many benefits the advisory board brings to the Ruckelshaus Center, the most important may be the insight, access, and credibility the board members provide. But that influence would be squandered without the structure and practices put in place to support the board and allow it to be effective in helping address challenges the center faces. Extension-based centers, offices, and programs, regardless of their circumstances, can adapt these practices to their situations and tap the expertise and influence of leaders in their areas to expand their capabilities and reach.

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