# Leadership Advisory Boards in Texas: Their Perceived Ability and Utilization as the Visioning Body for Program Development

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# Leadership Advisory Boards in Texas: Their Perceived Ability and Utilization as the Visioning Body for Program Development

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**Abstract:** The ability of Leadership Advisory Boards within Texas AgriLife Extension Service to function as the primary visioning/needs assessment source is paramount to maintaining the grassroots connection for programs. The study reported here sought to measure the self-perceptions of members' ability to meet the demand associated with this role. The study found that members feel confident in their ability to scan the community and identify relevant issues but found a need for increased training and orientation as to function and roles.

## Background

Extension has utilized the input and assistance of volunteers in developing educational events and programs since its inception. The structure and format of the volunteer involvement has changed over time, but the grassroots involvement has always been critical to the success of the educational programs that county Extension agents conduct. In 2006, Texas AgriLife Extension implemented a major change in the way counties involved advisory leaders, the roles that volunteers play in visioning, and the types of community leaders involved in Extension planning groups. Prior to 2006, Executive Boards were comprised primarily of Extension program committee members.

The new structure involved the dissolution of the Extension Program Council Executive Board and the formation of a Leadership Advisory Board in each county. The membership of the Leadership Advisory Board is not necessarily members of other committees and current clients of Extension. The individuals serving on Leadership Advisory Boards are community leaders who are identified for their vision of community needs and issues, involvement in community organizations, and ability to build support for successful programs and organizations.

The Leadership Advisory Board has fewer functions than the Executive Board and is tasked primarily with visioning and advocacy activities. Visioning consists of scanning the community and assisting the County Extension Agents in identifying issues that are important to the community as a whole. These issues may or may not be related to the base program areas that Extension works in, but should be issues for which Extension can help to facilitate solutions.

Ebling (1985) described the role of Extension Advisory Boards as "to help in planning and conducting effective educational programs, but in these special ways-lend guidance to needs assessments and program emphasis" (Committee's purpose section, para. 1). This excerpt suggests that visioning and needs assessment have been identified as a primary role of Advisory Boards for at least 25 years. Additionally, Anderson (1989) identified a process of community scanning to identify the issues that would become the primary focus of Extension programs. Robinson, Dubois, and Bailey (2005) described the mission of County Advisory Boards to "Identify critical issues that affect the county" (Secondary data section, Figure 2).

Boleman and Dodd (2007) defined Strategic Visioning as the process of developing a plan. It results in a view of the future that most in the organization can support. They further described Strategic Planning as the process of developing the steps that put the vision into action. In the strategic planning process, the Leadership Advisory Board sets priorities and guides others in identifying the most important needs to be addressed in a community. After the needs are identified and priorities set, community organizations determine their goals, objectives, roles, responsibilities and timelines for meeting the needs. Boleman and Dodd (2007) further outlined the differences between Inside-Out Planning and Outside-In Planning. They stated:

> Inside-out planning usually focuses on the organization as the primary client. It looks at the organization's mission goals and purposes…and is usually reactive in nature.

> At the county level, Extension's inside-out focused groups include program area committees, youth boards, coalitions and task forces. The members of these groups have a vested interest in the specific subject matter being discussed.

> Outside-in planning entails looking into an organization from the outside. It focuses on society as the primary audience. It challenges the status quo and can cause discomfort to employees because it often suggests change. Outside-in planning is usually proactive in nature.

> In Texas Cooperative Extension, outside-in planning is typically conducted by a county's leadership advisory board. This group is not connected to the specific subject-matter areas addressed by Extension programs; instead, it represents the "big picture" thoughts and ideas of the community. The members of a leadership advisory board must represent the voices of the people and be truly "visionary" in their approach. (p. 2)

The Strengthening Extension Advisory Leaders Curriculum (2003) describes the role that advisory leaders play in the process as:

> …the critical role of linking Extensions to its publics. It is this vital function that enables

Extension to do programming with the assurance of addressing customer needs…The process begins with the planning phase which includes environmental scanning and needs assessment. Advisory leaders input is especially critical at this stage where advisory leaders represent needs from the learner perspective. (Background, para. 1)

The role and purpose of Advisory Boards are well documented; the study reported here was designed to measure the perceived effectiveness of members at meeting the primary role of visioning. Ensuring that Extension is engaging local leaders with the ability and interest in identifying and prioritizing the most important issues in a county is paramount to maintaining relevance in our programs.

# Methods

The researchers developed a survey instrument that was completed by selected Leadership Advisory Board members to address, among other topics, the following research questions.

1. What is the competency level of members of Leadership Advisory Boards on the pertinent issues in the county? Do members believe that they can scan the environment and assist the County Extension Agent to maintain relevancy?

2. Do members of the Leadership Advisory Board believe that their ideas lead to programs? Is the visioning process that they undertake just an exercise, or is it used in setting the direction that local educational programs will follow?

The survey was completed via mailed or Web-based survey by members, based upon their preference. Returned mail survey instruments were entered into the Web-based survey program and aggregated with those entered by individual members.

The sample was selected randomly from the 254 counties in Texas, with certain restrictions. There is representation from counties of varying size, based upon the current structure that Texas AgriLife Extension uses to group counties by category. Fifty counties were included in the initial sample. County Extension agents provided mailing addresses for each of their members and electronic mail addresses for those they had. Of the 505 members, the researchers were given electronic mail addresses for 173.

SPSS 14.0 for Windows software was used for data analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize data. Frequencies, percentages, central tendency measures, and variability were used to describe the data.

Participants were asked three open-ended questions to seek further input regarding the benefits, concerns, and areas of improvement they perceived in relation to the Leadership Advisory Board in their county. Individuals were also asked to identify other Extension committees or task forces on which they served. All responses were optional, with 197 unique respondents responding to one or more of the open-ended questions. Only 39 respondents did not provide feedback to at least one open-ended question. Qualitative data were summarized using the procedure outlined by Dooley and Murphy (2001) to theme and aggregate the responses.

Of the 505 mailed surveys, 15 were returned due to inaccurate addresses, none of which had electronic mail addresses, making the final sample size 490 Leadership Advisory Board members. The response rate was 48.16%, ($n = 236$), of which 123 were completed via the on-line system and 113 returned the survey through the mail. With the response rate approaching 50%, non-response error was a concern. Using the procedure outlined by Lindner, Murphy, and Briers (2001), the researcher compared the responses from early responders to those of late responders on the major constructs of the study. For the purposes of this analysis, "Late Responders" were defined as those who responded after the initial deadline. On the initial

deadline date, a last reminder was e-mailed to the Leadership Advisory Board members for whom that information was available, and county Extension agents in the sample counties made follow-up phone calls to the members in their counties. This effort generated an additional 61 responses, which all arrived after the initial deadline, including six that were not included in the initial analysis of data. A one-way *t*-test yielded no significant differences ($p \le .05$) between the two groups, indicating that the data may be generalized to the target population (Lindner, Murphy, & Briers).

# Results

Respondents were asked to react to a series of statements that related to their ability to scan the environment and identify pertinent issues within the community. Table 1 shows the percentages who either Agree or Strongly Agree with the statement, based on a five-point Likert-type scale.

**Table 1.**
Members' Perceptions Related to Ability to Indentify Community Issues

| Statement | | | Frequency of Responses | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | SD[1] | D | N | A | SA | $\bar{x}$ | SD | Total |
| I feel confident in my knowledge of issues important to the county | 3 1.3% | 1 0.4% | 19 8.05% | 153 64.8% | 60 25.4% | 4.13 | .672 | 236 |
| My profession requires that I know what is important to the residents of the county | 3 1.3% | 12 5.1% | 49 20.85% | 109 46.4% | 62 26.38% | 3.91 | .887 | 235 |
| I work with a diverse group of county residents on a regular basis | 4 1.7% | 16 6.8% | 33 14% | 122 51.9% | 61 26% | 3.93 | .906 | 235 |
| I am often perceived as a leader in my community | 2 0.8% | 5 2.1% | 43 18.2% | 152 64.4% | 34 14.4% | 3.89 | .691 | 236 |
| I have a broad understanding of issues that affect my community | 0 0% | 4 1.7% | 29 12.7% | 152 66.3% | 44 19.2% | 4.03 | .624 | 229 |
| I was asked to serve on the Leadership Advisory Board due to my community leadership or professional position | 1 0.4% | 1 0.4% | 18 7.9% | 144 63.2% | 64 28.1% | 4.18 | .624 | 228 |
| The programs that the County Extension Agents develop and | 1 0.4% | 2 0.9% | 18 7.9% | 136 59.4% | 72 31.4% | 4.21 | .653 | 229 |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| deliver are relevant to the most important needs of this community | | | | | | | |
| **Grand Mean for Community Assessment Skills** | | | | | **4.04** | **.504** | |

[1]Responses: SD (strongly disagree)=1, D (disagree)=2, N (neutral)=3, A (agree)=4, SA (strongly agree)=5.

Based on the results, Leadership Advisory Board members felt confident in their knowledge and understanding of the issues present in their county and that the programs developed are relevant to address those issues. Members also felt confident that the reason they were asked to serve on the Board was that they are viewed in the community as leaders, indicating that Extension has identified the right individuals to serve in those roles.

The next set of questions related to the members' perceptions of how their suggestions led to a response from the county Extension agent in programming toward the issues identified. Five statements were related to this area in the survey instrument; Table 2 outlines the attitudes associated with each of them.

**Table 2.**
Members' Perceptions Related to Extension Response to Suggestions

| Statement | Frequency of Responses | | | | | $\bar{x}$ | SD | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | SD[1] | D | N | A | SA | | | |
| The issues identified by the Leadership Advisory Board are relevant and acted upon by the County Extension Agents | 1 0.4% | 5 2.2% | 26 11.5% | 136 59.9% | 59 26% | 4.09 | .705 | 227 |
| Issues identified are based upon the opinions and experiences of the membership of the Board | 1 0.4% | 5 2.2% | 33 14.6% | 144 63.7% | 43 19% | 3.99 | .683 | 226 |
| When the Leadership Advisory Board suggests an educational program to the County Extension Agents, it is usually conducted | 0 0% | 5 2.2% | 42 18.5% | 129 56.8% | 51 22.5% | 4.00 | .707 | 227 |
| Since joining the Leadership Advisory Board, the Board and County Extension Agents have conducted a needs | 1 0.4% | 9 4% | 34 15% | 132 58.4% | 50 22.1% | 3.98 | .757 | 226 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| assessment process to identify new issues | | | | | | | | |
| Often, the County Extension Agents suggest the programs that they feel comfortable addressing, and the Leadership Advisory Board agrees with the Agents | 0 0% | 14 6.2% | 54 23.9% | 121 53.5% | 37 16.4% | 3.80 | .783 | 226 |
| **Grand Mean for Vision to Programs** | | | | | | **3.65** | **.425** | |

These data suggest relatively strong agreement with the statements regarding Leadership Advisory Board suggestions leading to Extension educational programs. These data suggest that almost 70% of respondents believe that often the agents suggest programs they would prefer to address and that the Board goes along with those suggestions. This perception is problematic on many levels, but leads to the question of relevance of programs. Leadership Advisory Board members should be identifying the issues, and county Extension agents should take those issues to program planning groups for further planning and action.

In addition to the two Likert scale statements highlighted above, members were asked an open-ended question to identify some strengths and weaknesses associated with the Leadership Advisory Board structure ($n = 181$). Some strengths are summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3.**
Summary of Perceived Benefits of Leadership Advisory Boards to Extension

| **Primary Benefit Identified by Members** | **Frequency** |
|---|---|
| Visioning/Needs Assessment | 92 |
| Providing Educational Programs Directly | 60 |
| Advocacy/Visibility of Extension | 42 |

Data from this question show that Leadership Advisory Board members recognized that visioning and needs assessment were among their primary responsibilities, which 92 of 181 respondents agreed was a benefit.

# Conclusions

The study suggests that member of the Leadership Advisory Board are confident in their ability to scan the community for important issues. This signals that Extension has been successful in engaging the types of community leaders needed for the board to be successful at this role. They further believe that their recommendations lead to a response from Extension via an educational program. These findings suggest that Extension should continue to rely heavily on these groups to lead our visioning and strategic planning efforts. The foundation of Extension is based upon grassroots program efforts that are relevant to the most important issues in a county, and the study reported here confirms that advisory boards are an excellent

means of maintaining that relevance.

The fact that 60 members recognize an Advisory Board function of direct delivery of programs suggest that there may be a need for increased orientation and training of members related to responsibilities and mission of the group. Place (2009) reminds readers that a key role for these groups is "obtaining quality input for truly identifying grassroots need (not a rubber stamp function) (p 1). Place (2009) also points out that a part of managing an advisory committee is "orientation and training to Extension and the advisory committee". The study reported here confirms the need to engage and train these groups to serve this critical function.

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