

EDUCATIONAL COALITIONS, POLITICAL COALITIONS AND ROLES FOR EXTENSION

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Coalition building is not an end in itself. It is a complicated and time-consuming process that undoubtedly has some intrinsic value, but not enough to justify taking time and energy away from other things we could be doing. Coalition building has to be viewed as a means to an end. Its value comes from what can be done in coalitions that cannot be done by a single organization working alone.

Public policy education has at least five requirements that make coalition building worthwhile (Hahn, Greene and Waterman): 1) It needs to describe and explain multiple perspectives on the issues under consideration or create a forum in which each perspective is represented. 2) It needs to ensure balance or fairness in the treatment of each perspective. 3) It needs to include both technical information and process assistance. 4) It needs to reach multiple audiences, including citizens as well as policymakers and groups on different sides of an issue. 5) It requires the ability to address issues selected or defined by citizens or policymakers rather than by the educators themselves. Each of these things can be done by a single organization, but they can often be done more easily or more effectively if two or more organizations join together.

An *educational coalition* is a coalition that makes educational programs with such characteristics possible. I cannot think of any easy rules about what the membership of such a coalition should be. It should have whatever membership is necessary in order to reflect multiple perspectives, to give balanced attention to them, to provide the necessary content and process assistance, to reach multiple audiences, and to address the issues the way they need to be defined. In our comparative evaluation of eleven Kellogg-funded projects, we considered recommending that a coalition for public policy education should include representatives of all points of view on the issues being addressed, but we stopped short of that (Hahn, Greene and Waterman). What we did say is that there should be some real differences among the partners. Otherwise, why bother with a coalition? We also said there needs to be a substantial degree of parity among the partners—at least to the point at which participants are feeling pressure to seriously consider unwanted or uncomfortable advice. Some of the coalition partners we interviewed said they

valued the pressure to do things they knew they would not do if they were not involved in a coalition with other organizations.

Educational coalitions can be distinguished from political coalitions (a distinction suggested by participants in one of the Kellogg-funded projects), and there are two kinds of political coalitions. An *advocacy coalition* is a coalition of like-minded groups—groups that find common interests in a particular issue even if they disagree on everything else—and who join together for the purpose of enhancing their collective ability to influence public decisions in their favor. (Sabatier uses the term “advocacy coalition” with similar meaning). By contrast, a *consensus-seeking coalition* is one that attempts to include all the relevant perspectives on an issue for the purpose of learning about one another and searching for possible common ground on which they can take public action or advocate public decisions. The expectation or hope is that such actions or decisions will have a greater likelihood of approval and successful implementation because none of the relevant perspectives have been left out.

Development of a consensus-seeking coalition could be a long-term goal or vision for a public policy education program. The dialogue and mutual understanding that such coalitions aim for is an equally good goal for public policy education. If an educational coalition can be created with the all-encompassing membership of a coalition-seeking coalition, I think that would be great, and it should be done. But insisting that no educational work should be done before every viewpoint is represented in a coalition is an unreasonably difficult standard to meet. Moreover, I do not believe everybody has to be represented in order for an educator to have the ability to bring all points of view together. Bringing them together can be the goal of an educational program without being the starting point.

Advocacy coalitions, on the other hand, should be avoided by public policy educators. I suppose there is no inherent reason why a coalition of like-minded groups could not plan and implement an educational program that seeks a balanced understanding of all points of view. But I think it would be unlikely. Such a coalition, like a single organization working alone, will find it difficult to address the five characteristics of public policy education programs mentioned earlier. There will be strong pressure on educators to promote the coalition’s shared interests at the expense of a balanced treatment of other points of view.

Educators do, of course, experience pressure to join and support advocacy coalitions. When I presented some of these ideas in New York a few months ago, a horticulture agent said, “That’s exactly what the green industry in my county wants me to do.” He asked my advice, and the best I could offer was, “Try and help the green industry understand that it is *in their interests* to have other perspectives included because stable solutions to the issues the green indus-

try cares about are not likely to happen unless all points of view are understood and taken into account." An educator who simply commiserates with a client group about the stupidity of the opposition is not doing anyone any favors.

Another important point was raised at that same meeting. An agriculture agent from another county said she was surprised no one had talked about the down side of working in coalitions. She said, if extension does everything in collaboration with other organizations, there is a danger funders will say extension is duplicating the work of other agencies and making no unique contribution. In her view, that is a dangerous image to have in times of scarcity when funders are looking for excuses to cut budgets. That has been my nightmare as well—that extension will be ready to become a leading public policy education agency at just the time its funders decide to eliminate the organization.

The agent's comments underline the importance of finding better and better ways to articulate a unique educational role regarding public issues. An extension association director told a story at the same meeting about a water quality coalition in her county in which extension was involved. At some point, the county legislature made a decision to formalize the coalition as a Water Quality Management Agency, and extension got left out. It had to fight its way back in and did so by persuasively arguing that it had a unique public education role to contribute.

Articulating that role, and living up to it, is the flip side of working in coalitions and is equally important. Extension needs to collaborate in order to do a good job—especially in public policy education because of the characteristics mentioned earlier—and to help others do a good job. But it also needs to have a role that it plays in coalitions that is complementary to others and widely regarded as unique and important. If my nightmare is defunding just when extension gets its public policy education act together, my dream is that extension will have a widely held image as *the agency that does educational programs on important issues, addresses the public as well as private dimensions of the issues, brings pertinent information to bear, and helps everyone understand all sides of the issues*. Its reputation for doing those things will be the reason people participate in its programs as well as the reason other organizations collaborate with it in coalitions.

REFERENCES

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