

Tips for Establishing a County Extension Council

*Michigan State University Extension
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Note for 2005-06 Issue Identification Process: This may be the time for a county to re-constitute an ongoing Extension council. The following information is provided to outline the steps in establishing and maintaining an active council.

EXTENSION COUNCILS:

A Network for Citizen Involvement

This document summarizes the material that is in a handbook prepared for Michigan State University Extension staff members to assist their work in organizing and maintaining an active and involved Extension Council. The information on these pages provides a conceptual framework as well as specific suggestions.

Our work with Extension Councils in Michigan is based on these basic assumptions:

- Every citizen has something of value to contribute.
- Citizens have a role in shaping their organizations, communities and governments.
- Citizen participation is necessary to develop the Extension educational programming that best meets the needs of the local community.
- The interaction among council members--each representing different experiences, backgrounds, and values--promotes a deeper understanding of the work of Extension. This interaction also fosters creative approaches for addressing issues of concern in the community.

The setting for this work with Extension Councils is focused on counties--in Michigan this refers to a collection of local communities, organized for governmental purposes. However, the basic principles that underlie this effort can be applied to working with citizen groups in a variety of different settings. The central idea is to bring together a group of citizens who will work in partnership with the Extension organization to develop and carry out educational programming that best reflects the needs of the citizenry.

Local Extension Councils

Every county will have an on-going Extension Council that has diverse representation, identifies and prioritizes local issues, reviews the educational programming and advocates for the support of Extension.

Extension Councils:

- Identify community assets, issues, and concerns that Extension can and should address, and prioritize according to need and available resources.
- Identify other community organizations/agencies to collaborate in addressing specific issues.
- Assist in evaluating the progress of Extension programming
- Identify potential resources and provide support for acquiring the resources necessary to address program initiatives.
- Communicate to others the availability and importance of Extension's educational programming.
- Advocate for Extension, for its programs, and for the results of those programs, to policymakers.

The Purpose of an Extension Council

"If you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organization or community."

*David Chrislip and Carl Larson, **Collaborative Leadership***

Extension is both reactive and proactive on issues of concern in local communities. An organized, diverse group of local citizens coming together on a regular basis to focus on the work of Extension can react to concerns and anticipate developing issues. The work of the Extension Council needs to be issue-focused, reflecting changing situations within the county. The most important underlying principles include:

- Council membership that reflects the full diversity of the county.
- Council members engaging in identifying the issues of primary concern and identifying appropriate educational approaches.
- Council members prepared to regularly articulate to others--including policymakers at all levels--the importance of Extension's educational programming.
- Council members having access to experiences that enhance leadership skills and to information that addresses issues of interest.

Starting an Extension Council

The process for starting the Extension Council needs to be carried out with thoughtful consideration given to a variety of factors:

- What is the purpose?
- What type of advisory structure has existed in the past?
- Who should be included in the initial planning process?

An informal *transition committee* can be very important in working to establish a new council. The transition group could be composed of a few members of a former committee, as well as current collaborators and key leaders in the county. These people should be familiar with Extension and have a broad view of the issues and concerns facing the county. They can help identify and recruit members and can also plan and implement the orientation for the newly formed council.

Deciding on a Structure--No magic answers are readily available as to the "right" way to organize an Extension Council. The structure will differ among counties, and within a county over time (what works this year may not work next year). Influencing factors include:

Composition and diversity of the group--Decisions need to be made about the number of interests and groups within the county that need to be represented on the council.

Current issues of major concern--The composition of the council made need to change at times in order to help address specific concerns within the county. (e.g. land use, youth issues)

Size of Council--Extension Councils need to be large enough to be truly representative of the county, but small enough to allow for discussion and easy communication. A range of 12-20 members is often cited for such a group. A larger council could operate, in part, through sub-committees. A smaller council might want to devise ways to gather input from other interests on a regular basis.

Length of Term--The goal is to constitute an Extension Council that is stable enough to be able to make decisions and take action, and yet has enough turnover of members to ensure new thinking and new representation. Limiting the renewal of appointments is one possible approach.

Number of Meetings--The membership needs to determine a plan for communication and a schedule for meetings. If a group only meets once or twice a year, with little ongoing communication, then their active, vital involvement is in question. However, if a group meets too frequently over a sustained period of time, participation is likely to diminish. The key is to help the group find a way to balance the realities of time-constraints with the need for ongoing discussion and a connection with current issues in the county. It will also be important to encourage the use of alternate means of communication and discussion (sub-groups, written information, conference calls, electronic communication). As the committee is forming, it might be useful to suggest an initial schedule of regular meetings (monthly, bi-monthly) in order to build a sense of community within the group and to provide sufficient time for networking and for examining current issues of concern in the counties.

Determining a time for the council to meet is difficult and this may change over time to better reflect the needs of the membership. Suggestions have ranged from breakfast meeting, evenings, luncheons and late afternoons. A common suggestion, though, was the benefit of establishing the schedule of meetings for the entire year, or at least several months in advance.

Council Leadership--The decisions about a leadership structure can be made by the group itself, or by a transitional team of advisors. A variety of approaches could include: rotating chairpersons, a chairperson for a year, co-chairpersons; selection by appointment, by self-volunteering, by election.

Council Membership

Identifying Members--Decisions about the composition of the Extension Council may be the most important part of working with such groups. Identifying the partners needs to be done in a purposeful, deliberate manner, with advice from a variety of sources, including Extension staff and key community leaders. Selection of council members needs to be viewed as an ongoing process, not something that is fixed forever. As members become more familiar with serving in this role, they can share the responsibility for ensuring that the council continues to have a diverse and representative membership.

Diversity should be the driving force for the selection of Extension Council members. This diversity includes having people who represent differences in terms of:

age	ideas	length of residency in county
ethnicity	occupations	interests
background	connections	location in county

Identifying council members needs to take on a *future-focus*, not limited to the people and organizations that have been involved with Extension in the past. It is important to gather together partners who represent a range of experiences and different levels of familiarity with the work of Extension. Council members can mentor each other (perhaps a deliberate pairing), thus sharing specific knowledge about Extension and about local community issues.

The basic underlying question when determining the composition of the Extension Council is:

Given the present situation in the county, and taking into account future trends, who are the individuals and organizations that can partner with Extension to support educational programming related to issues of major concern in the county?

Questions to ask during the process of identifying council members include:

- Who are the key organizations addressing major Extension topic areas (agriculture, environmental protection, economic development, children, youth and family issues)? It will be important to include representation from various organizations that likely have different viewpoints on each topic.
- Which organizations are working to address a variety of community issues?
- Which organizations and/or individuals have particularly strong linkages to policymakers at each of the three levels?

- Who are the identifiable *opinion leaders*, representing various segments of the community (particular locations, age groups, ethnic groups), even if they don't hold formal positions?
- What are some of the active grassroots organizations whose work is related to Extension topic areas? Examples might include neighborhood organizations, parent associations, or other issue-focused groups.
- Who are the major business/economic interests in the county, particularly those who may work in partnership with Extension on issues of current concern?

In summary, identifying Extension Council members should be a dynamic, ongoing process. After a council begins to work together, other members may need to be added to address particular issues and/or to represent more diverse interests. Relationships with council members will hopefully be a long-term connection, whether or not the person comes to meetings or is actively involved over a long period of time.

Recruiting Members--Inviting someone to become an Extension Council member is best done through personal contact (possibly following a letter of invitation). The person who is likely to connect best with this potential member should make the contact. This might be a staff member, or another council member. During the process of recruiting council members it is important to be able to answer the questions about what this person will bring to the group, what their role will be and what will be the benefits of membership.

Why is this person being asked to be a member of the Extension Council?

Identify the *connecting points* between Extension in the county and the work that this potential council member is involved with (e.g. mutual interest in providing educational experiences for youth, offering educational resources concerning the environment, improving the economic viability in the area).

What are the benefits of serving on the Extension Council?

- Ability to network with others who share similar interests and concerns
- Opportunity to help shape local programming efforts which are important to the citizens in that county
- Opportunity to gather support for establishing and/or extending educational efforts around issues of concern in the county
- Opportunity to participate in leadership and issue-focused educational events.

What does Extension need?

- Assistance with identifying and framing the issues of concern to the local citizenry
- Help with evaluating community-based programming
- Help with communicating to others the value of Extension's educational programming

What type of commitment is a person making in joining the Extension Council?

- Agreement to be an active participant for at least __years
- Willingness to carry out the stated expectations of a County Extension Council
- Agreement to work cooperatively with other members to determine the work of the council

- Willingness to share information within their own social/business/community networks.

Retaining Members--In working with the Extension Council, there will be an ongoing need to balance continuity and accomplishment with the needs for diversity and representing current issues and concerns. It will be important to stay attuned to the concerns, interests and personal situations of the membership. It may be helpful to schedule an annual evaluation session where there are opportunities for both individual and group reflection on the work of the council. Some method of consciously pairing members may also be a way to provide avenues for communication and assessment.

When members end their period of involvement with the council, it seems very important to identify specific ways to continue their special connection to Extension and to help them stay informed about the work of Extension. Possible approaches might include sending a quarterly newsletter about the work of Extension in the county, inviting these members to an annual picnic or other social event, asking them to serve as an adviser for a new member of the council, etc.

Learning Opportunities for Extension Council Members--Serving on the Extension Council needs to be a mutually beneficial experience for the organization and for the membership. People are more willing to give of their time, their counsel, and their active involvement, if they also see ways to access information, make connections, and build skills. As an integral part of the work of the Extension Council, attention needs to be given to continually providing opportunities for council members to share and to learn. Extension has the ability to provide a wide range of important capacity-building educational opportunities for council members. Examples include:

- Linking a member with a resource person at the university
- Providing access to specialized training for specific members
- Designing a special learning experience for the entire council (e.g. a visit to the MSU campus and/or the state capitol, or a visit to see a particular programming effort in a neighboring county).

Helping New Members Understand Extension--It is very important to help new people become fully integrated members of the Extension Council. They need to be given access to information so that they feel like *insiders* and so that they quickly become knowledgeable about the work of the council. A few basic strategies include:

- Scheduling an informal orientation session
- Providing a notebook or packet of written information about Extension
- Pairing up a new member and a continuing member.

Extension Councils: Working Together as a Group

At the First Meeting--Here are some basic concepts that will set the tone for developing a productive and cohesive group.

- At the first meeting of a new council, and also at meetings where new members are joining an existing group, it is extremely important to pay close attention to

developing a sense of community within this group. Don't neglect this process in an effort to tell members everything there is to know about Extension.

- It is also important, though, to begin with the first meeting in building a firm base of understanding about the educational programming being conducted in the county and the linkage with the state's land grant university
- Setting the agenda for subsequent meetings should be seen as a group effort. Try to balance the showcasing of Extension programming with opportunities for networking among members, centered around the issues of concern within the county. How can those issues be addressed--by Extension alone or in coalition with others.
- Help the group pay attention to *process*. Over time, develop ground rules and strategies for dealing with conflict. Make certain that everyone's voice is heard. Agree on the appropriate methods for decision-making. Revisit these ground rules periodically.
- From the beginning, design ways that the group can effectively *take stock* of how it is functioning.

Building a Sense of Community--Group solidarity develops out of mutual trust and respect, which grows over time and allows members to feel free to express opinions and feelings and to disagree without fear of consequences. If the Extension Council is truly diverse, it will be very important to consciously help the group go through a specific process to identify their commonalities and differences. This is extremely important to do in the beginning of the council's work together, and then repeatedly as the group changes. A sense of community is built through having an opportunity to know and understand each other, and also through giving each council member an opportunity to fully contribute to the group. Group activities can build common understanding *and* the development of a group culture that fosters total group involvement.

The Components of a Group--One helpful approach to thinking about the work of the Extension Council is to recognize the three major components of a group coming together to address specific functions:

Interaction--This refers to the way participants work together while processing information. This includes the participant's feelings, attitudes, and expectations that will have a bearing on how they participate, cooperate, listen, trust, and work together. Background and experience will help shape these feelings and attitudes.

Content--The information, knowledge, experience, opinions, and ideas that are presented and shared at the meeting.

Structure--The way in which both the information and participants are organized in order to achieve the objectives of the group.

Adapted from University of Virginia Extension materials

It is important to work to keep these three components in balance. A meeting that is simply a social interaction leaves participants feeling as if they wasted time. On the other hand, a meeting that is simply a presentation of information misses the opportunity for group involvement and input. Structural issues (how the group operates, how decisions are made, etc.) are extremely important and they need to provide the underlying framework.

Agenda Setting--The agenda needs to be shaped by the council. One technique is to use time at the end of a meeting to decide the agenda for the next meeting, grouping items in these three categories:

- Decisions that need to be made
- Issues for group discussion
- Information that needs to be provided (reports, data, etc)

This technique then allows for assigning responsibility and building continuity between sessions.

Decision-Making--There are many different techniques for group decision-making. The purpose and expectations of the Extension Council seems to link most appropriately with *consensus decision-making*. The bringing together of a diverse group of citizens to assist Extension in addressing issues of local concern lends itself to building consensus.

Group Discussion--There are also many different techniques for facilitating group discussion. The group may be interested in learning some of these approaches, both for use during council meetings and for other community information-gathering sessions.

Dealing with Problems and Conflict--When one brings together a diverse group of citizens, there will undoubtedly be conflict, differing goals, and differing time-lines. The council will function effectively in a collaborative relationship only if there is open recognition of these realities, and a group willingness to adopt strategies for moving forward (e.g. designate code words to acknowledge the creativity that is inherent in conflict, agree on time-lines that maximize input but also bring closure).

It is important that the Extension Council develop strategies to accept conflict as natural. Conflict is an opportunity to examine the issues involved in depth and to learn more about the underlying values and assumptions held by individual members. Bringing conflict out in the open helps lead to a discussion that may lead to a better solution. Disagreement needs to be focused on the issue not the person.

Here are a few of the problems that may occur with an Extension Council and some very brief strategies for dealing with such situations (*Univ. of Virginia material*)

- Clarifying the real issue--Group members need to feel comfortable in identifying their interests (and the interest of the group they represent). Extension staff members also need to be clear in what is really needed and/or appropriate in a specific situation.
- People not coming to meetings--Individuals will participate in different issues, activities and groups only to the extent that their needs are being met. Careful attention needs to be given to providing *regular check-ups* on how the group is functioning.
- People dominating the meeting and people not participating in the discussion--Skillful group facilitation techniques can be helpful in both of these situations. Having the group designate ground rules may be helpful. Using some technique (passing a ball or other physical object) may also be useful. Non-participation may mean that someone is simply observing, but the facilitator needs to be particularly alert to provide *entry* opportunities.

Extension Councils: The Issue Identification Role

Issue identification should be an ongoing, institutionalized process that is central to the work of the Extension Council. The specific procedure can take many forms, but the underlying idea is that it is important to gather together a diverse group of citizens who routinely go through some process of asking questions about the issues of concern in the county and about the role that Extension can play in addressing those issues. This role is likely to be of continuing interest to council members who are interested in issues of concern locally.

Issues are matters of widespread public concern. Public issues are controversial, lack easy answers, and are seldom solved. The Extension Council can provide a forum for bringing together different ideas, approaches, and resources in order to address the issue in a sustainable, community-centered manner. An *issue-focused council* shifts the attention from Extension's structural framework (program areas etc.) to focusing on the concerns in local communities. The council cannot *solve* the issue, but it can help mobilize educational resources to address the situation. Over time, the council will probably view a variety of issues, with working groups possibly forming to address specific strategies.

The *value-added* that Extension is able to bring to bear on an issue in a community is the capacity for education. (e.g. we don't usually go out and clean up the lakes and streams, but we do educate citizens on the approaches and alternatives). Making this distinction may help members see other possible collaborators. The resulting network that will form out of such an approach can make important contributions within the county. Michigan's land grant university can facilitate a network for identifying applied research possibilities, providing information, and connecting potential resources.

Some of the basic criteria that can be used in any issue identification process include:

- The issue, problem or concern falls within the Extension mission.
- The issue can be addressed through educational strategies.
- There is expertise available through Extension to help address the issue.
- Others have identified the issue as being of great concern in the county.

Different Strategies--One approach that could be used is for the Extension Council to conduct an issues forum, inviting the general citizenry to participate in gathering information and identifying issues of concern.

Step 1--The council members share interests and values and decide on a timeline.

Step 2--Conduct an environmental scan. This includes looking at demographics, economic factors, political, social and cultural systems, natural resource systems, and analyzing the threats and opportunities.

Step 3--Conduct an organizational scan, reviewing Extension's capabilities, strengths, and weaknesses.

Step 4--Identify and select strategic issues, based on the input gathered in steps 2 and 3.

Step 5--Develop a program plan for each strategic issue.

Step 6--Develop an implementation plan.

Step 7--Monitor and evaluate programs, and report progress and program results.

Ongoing Program Evaluation--With the input from a diverse group of citizens who care about community issues, Extension can be certain that our work remains relevant, productive, and tuned in to the changing needs of the community. The Extension Council helps set the agenda,

evaluate progress, and make decisions about future directions. The issue identification process and program evaluation are closely intertwined. Program evaluation is a continuous part of collaborative planning to address issues of local concern. This type of review also provides evidence that that can be persuasive to funding agencies, legislators, and other key officials.

Some of the critical questions that should guide monitoring and evaluation are:

- What progress are we making toward our goals and objectives?
- Are the strategies we picked helping us to reach our goals and objectives?
- What changes are we seeing in program participants and the condition of the problems/issues we are addressing as a result of our program?

University of Virginia Extension

Program Review and Evaluation--A successful program review and evaluation involves a continual monitoring of the external environment along with a look at the specific program and how it is being carried out. The Extension Council can play a major role with that external monitoring:

- What is happening now in the community? (e.g. construction, or closing of a plant, building of a new store, etc.)
- What is happening in a particular sector? (e.g. people going off welfare)
- What are some of the forces of change? (e.g. new people moving in)

Reporting is the means of capturing and communicating important information and data about the program. What happens to people and their communities as a result of our professional investments of time, resources, and energy needs to be summarized and communicated to relevant audiences. Reports are important as a communication instrument, as a method of accountability, and as a basis of planning. Staff will generally be responsible for the actual collection of data. However, Extension Council members can play an important role in helping communicate that information to key leaders.

The role of Extension Councils in reviewing programs is one of assessing the overall *fit* between programming strategies and the needs of the community. It is not a role of performance evaluation. The questions are general:

- Are we on the right track with this effort?
- What could be changed?
- What other resources and/or collaborations are needed?
- How does this fit with the interests of our policymakers?

Extension Councils: The Public Role

Public Relations Role--Some Extension staff members have commented that *public relations* constitute about 90% of the ongoing work of the Extension Council. This refers to developing the awareness of the many different educational roles that Extension plays, and talking about them in a wide variety of settings. This can be differentiated from *advocacy* in that it is ongoing and continual, not focused on a particular issue or funding need. Good public relations skills can be fostered among council members by providing them with a variety of opportunities to experience the full scope of Extension programming (visits, demonstrations, discussions with program participants etc.).

Identifying and Obtaining Resources--Extension Council members assist with resource development through their networking and their connections to a wide array of organizations and agencies within the county. They may be able to identify grant possibilities, identify in-kind contributions, or help solicit special funding.

Citizens Advocating for Extension--Extension is a publicly funded (state, county and federal) entity and it is imperative that we be responsive to the citizenry--our shareholders. As government funding declines, it becomes even more important that citizens be able to clearly articulate to policymakers at all levels of government the impact of Extension programming now and in the future. The advocacy role is extremely important for the Extension Council. Here are some underlying observations about advocacy:

- We need to be continually working at building relationships with policymakers at all levels of government around issues of concern in the county.
- We need to always remember that policymakers are most interested in information that is locally specific and that shows the direct impact of a program on their constituents.
- The dynamic interaction among the diverse membership on the Extension Council can strengthen the message that is communicated to policymakers. (For example, when urban and rural members build a common base of understanding about the issue of land use, they become especially strong advocates for the educational role that Extension can play on this issue.)
- A council that draws its membership from all sectors of the county will have connections in different ways to various policymakers.
- Those who sincerely feel that Extension's educational programming is important want to share that information with the policymakers who make funding decisions.

Different Strategies for Advocacy--There are a variety of approaches that can be used to build ongoing linkages between the Extension Council and the policymakers who represent that county. Decisions on an appropriate strategy will depend on the current situation in a particular county. Underlying considerations need to include:

- Developing an understanding of the interests and concerns of the policymakers
- Acquire an understanding of the linkages and interests of the council members
- Make certain that council members have access to any information they need about specific programs, and also that they are knowledgeable about the interests of the policymaker
- Plan to develop an ongoing strategy for maintaining communication linkages between the council members and policymakers, not just in response to a particular funding need.

Specific approaches to building those ongoing linkages might include:

- Asking the council to host an annual social event which also features information about Extension programming
- Asking individual council members to become the *connecting person* with individual policymakers
- Encouraging council members and staff to work together to host an issue-focused event which highlights our work on a particular issue (e.g. land-use, children's issues).

Assessing the Workings of the Extension Council

In order to insure the ongoing health of the council, time needs to be set aside periodically to evaluate the meetings and the work of the council. This gives members an opportunity to tell what they like about the group, to identify areas of dissatisfaction, and provides a time to plan improvements in the way the group operates. The framework for discussion might be:

- How are the meetings of the council?
- How is the council doing in meeting its goals?
- What might be done differently in the future?
- How are individual members feeling about their involvement in the council?

Here are some more specific questions that the staff and the membership can use to jointly and evaluate their work:

- Does the group truly represent the diversity of the population in the county?
- Is there adequate ongoing communication between staff and the council?
- Are all members willing and able to explain to others--friends, co-workers, and policymakers--the value of educational programming?
- Do members meet the interests and needs of both members and staff?

Some of the possible outcomes of such a review include:

- The assessment that everything is working wonderfully and nothing should be changed.
- The decision that meetings need to become more participatory.
- Identification of the need to recruit new members, perhaps seeking representation from different sectors of the community.
- The decision that more learning opportunities need to be developed for council members. The understanding that the council needs to work to finding more *common ground* among its membership.

The internal interaction among Extension Council members should be viewed as an ongoing process, always under development. The way that the council operates internally directly affects the relevance and importance of its work in the community. Extension councils are the dynamic force to ensure that Extension's educational programming most effectively addresses the issues of concern in each community.

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EXTENSION COUNCILS: Partnerships Focused on Issues of Concern in the County Relevant Current Literature

Note: The books below do not tell how to set up partnering/advisory committees. Some of these authors analyze the realities and the political climate that currently shape public organizations, others explore the concepts of shared leadership in community setting. This should be considered the BEGINNING of such a listing of literature resources.

***Public Participation in Public Decisions*, John Clayton Thomas, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995**

Governmental agencies are the context for the public participation that is discussed in this book, thus offering a more legalistic approach than is appropriate for Extension Committees. However, the discussions about the benefits and limitations of public participation are applicable. Chapter 4, *Defining the Relevant Public*, is particularly useful

***Collaborative Leadership: How Citizens and Civic Leaders Can Make a Difference*, David Chrislip and Carl Larson, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994**

The "collaborative premise" that is the basis for this book provides the philosophical assumption for framing our work with Extension Committees (see quote at the beginning of this document).

***Managing Chaos and Complexity in Government*, L. Douglas Kiel, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995**

The author presents a framework to address the need for responsiveness and innovation in an era of shrinking budgets and unpredictable change.

***Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Ronald Heifetz, Harvard University Press, 1994**

This author examines our expectations of leadership in a time of complex, inter-related problems. The book promotes a sense of partnering together and a revitalization of civic life, focused on issues of concern in our communities.

***The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, Peter M. Senge, et al., Currency/Doubleday, 1994.**

A practical guide to putting Senge's theory of learning organizations into practice. A section entitled, "Team Learning" includes numerous suggestions for using "dialogue" and "skillful discussion" for developing a learning team composed of diverse members.

***The Leader of the Future*, Frances Hesselbein, et al., Jossey-Bass, 1996.**

A fascinating collection of short essays from 31 distinguished thinkers, writers, educators, and consultants with leadership experience in business, nonprofit, and government organizations. Many of the essays emphasize how changes in our society have led to changes in our thinking about organizations and leadership: from highly structured organizations and patriarchal leadership to team-based organizations, distributed leadership, and non-positional power

***Making Common Sense*, Wilfred H. Drath and Charles J. Palus, Center for Creative Leadership, 1994.**

This monograph describes leadership as "people participating in a shared process."