

Research & Policy Brief Series

Improving University-Extension-Community Communication around Controversial Issues

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What is the Issue?

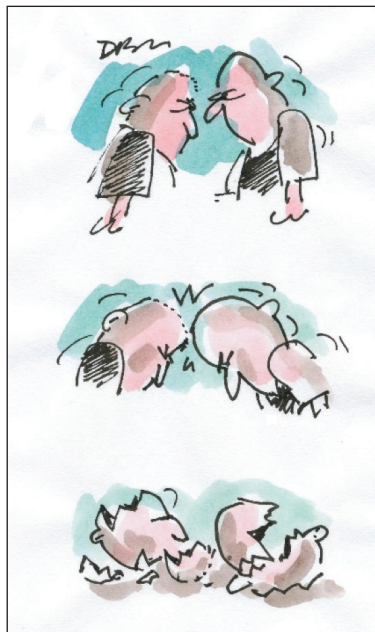
Every year, in every community, local officials deliberate and make decisions about schools, roads, budget or development priorities, zoning rights, and other issues that are important to their constituents. Elected and appointed officials in New York State communities are expected to be well-informed about the often complex and sometimes controversial issues their communities face.

At the same time, trust in most traditional institutions and sources of information, including government and higher education, has declined. Decision making processes at all levels—local, state, and national—have become increasingly polarized and contentious. While universities like Cornell offer valuable resources, given this context, how can university researchers and Extension educators help local leaders access, interpret, and utilize relevant information with which to address complex or controversial issues?

Our Research Approach

Existing inquiry on the challenges for using research-based information in public policy decisions demonstrates the complexity of community decision making and even the process of human learning itself. There are many potential pathways of influence between information sources and policy makers. These diverse and multi-directional pathways can range from direct and often formalized contacts between researchers and policy makers, for example at public hearings or policy briefings, to very informal and indirect connections. Depending on the issue and place, some pathways will be more effective at transferring information than others, and no single pathway will be always available or preferable.

A strength of the national Extension system is its commitment to providing “research based information” to its audiences.¹ Cornell University’s Community and Regional Development Institute (CaRDI) seeks to strengthen these system-wide efforts through the research and outreach-related activities of our Informed Decision Making projects² by developing new insights into how local government officials and university-affiliated Extension educators can recognize and deal with tensions between science, politics, and group identities in community decision making processes. There is currently a lack of relevant research which focuses primarily on local government decisions.



Neil Dishington

During an initial pilot project, CaRDI partnered with Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) educators in three counties. CCE regularly acts as an intermediary between local communities and Cornell resources. The project focused on the following research questions:

1. How are university-based information, research, and outreach efforts viewed, accessed, interpreted, and used by decision makers dealing with controversial issues?
2. How do the tensions and conflicts that often exist between data, research, politics, experience, ideology, and opinion play out in the decision making process of local government officials?
3. How can university researchers, Extension educators, and other actors best support informed decision making effectively in local government contexts?

CaRDI focused on county-level legislators and CCE professionals, exploring cases of how community decision makers used university-based information in past decisions made by

the three county legislatures. Subsequent focus groups focused on how the issue was raised, who the key players were, the level of controversy, whether and how outside expertise was sought, and whether that information or expertise included university-based sources. A preliminary group of key variables, themes, and ideas emerged from the focus group findings and our literature review. Whether and how effectively the decision making groups used scientific information depended on:

1. *Attributes of the decision:*
The level of technical and other kinds of issue complexity, the extent and nature of associated controversy, whether it was a novel or recurring decision, the perceived importance of the decision’s consequences and impacts.
2. *Attributes of the elected individuals involved:*
Individuals’ experiences and values, leadership skills, relationships and trust, credibility in relation to the issue.
3. *Attributes of the decision-making body (group):*
Formal political structures of the legislature, established norms for committee work and decision making, the political diversity/uniformity of the elected body.
4. *Other political and contextual factors:*
Distribution and sources of political power, interest levels of local versus non-local constituencies in decision, on- or off-election year.

¹ See <http://nifa.usda.gov/Extension/>

² The research project and this brief were supported by the USDA NIFA Hatch project NYC-159400. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the view of the NIFA or the USDA

The Importance of Intermediaries

By complementing the focus group findings with a case study and set of interviews around current community decisions, we confirmed that county officials had relied to some extent on university-based research, and that it came from multiple sources, including Cornell. The officials also used “intermediaries” like CCE educators to help them find and interpret useful information. Depending on the pathways of influence used to share the data, CCE educators were sometimes perceived as policy neutral and sometimes not. Just as important was the policy makers’ trust in the individual and their position within a familiar organizational structure. In one of the case studies, a professional staffer for the county legislature played an obvious intermediary role in the environmental issue we examined. His job depended on policy maker trust and routine access to policy makers. He perceived himself as “a translator and aggregator of science who helps policy makers figure out how to respond.” He proactively sought out, synthesized, and prioritized information—including from CCE and the research communities—relevant to his portfolio and the specific issue at hand.

Community, Controversy, and Universities

Of interest to CaRDI is one particularly powerful decision making attribute: the extent and nature of controversy associated with the public issue. Yale scholar and CaRDI project advisor Dan Kahan has developed a theory of “cultural cognition”, which argues that people are prone, in certain circumstances, to interpret information and science through a lens of cultural values and group identities that have become associated with an issue.³ When this association happens, the environment for communication becomes “polluted”, reducing the likelihood that science or other information can be assessed with neutrality. Individuals use information that supports their pre-existing beliefs and/or group identities and discredit information that challenges them. The very meaning of “informed decision making” is itself put into question.

In further considering how university-based information and resources might influence local policy formulation, Paul Sabatier’s (1988) advocacy coalition framework of policy change is also relevant.⁴ Sabatier posits that “policy-oriented learning” is generally strategic, and is typically motivated by the desire to move core beliefs and related positions into policy. The core beliefs of policy coalitions are much more resistant to the influence of new, dissonant evidence and associated learning than are “secondary” beliefs, suggesting a much heavier educational lift is needed to influence the former over the latter.

Improving Outreach to Support Informed Decision Making

How can university researchers and outreach staff working with controversial issues go beyond information delivery to support truly informed decision making? Research-based recommendations on how educators can maintain a “clean science communication environment” in polarized local contexts remain provisional. The following are some observations based on the literature and CaRDI’s research to date:

“...in order to persuade members of the public to accept empirically sound information, it is necessary to do more than merely make such information available to them.”

—Dan Kahan⁵

Effective educators do more than act as information conduits. The more attention educators pay to ways to create or take advantage of contexts conducive to learning, the more likely policy learning is to occur. Renowned psychologist Howard Gardner hints at the strategic educational possibilities with his vast “auditorium of mind changing”.⁶ His auditorium contains six arenas (from large and diverse publics to an individual mind), four types of content (concepts to theories), eight formats to which people with different “intelligences” are most attuned, and seven levers of influence that facilitate or hinder learning. Figuring out the match between the lever and the other dimensions is part of what a good educator is able to do.

People with strong beliefs are unlikely to change them based on a simple presentation of new facts. People can and do sometimes change their deeply held beliefs based on evidence, but rarely based on a one-time exposure. The jobs of local policy makers, few of whom are trained scientists, depend on how they serve the interests and beliefs of their constituents. Because of this, their relationship to scientific evidence can be even more fraught with complexities than it is for the rest of us.

Controversy can present opportunities as well as risks for educators. Controversy can provide educators with an asset they often find missing: the gift of attention. As noted, however, teaching or outreach approaches that work in other situations are rarely effective in the face of controversy. More time, more trust building, and more back-and-forth dialogue are usually important.

Avoid framing issues, or using language, in ways likely to “pollute” the science communication environment. When information becomes attached to group identity and controversy, many more kinds of cognitive bias influence how data and information are perceived. Which “side” paid for the study or has endorsed it? Will bias be detected from language used or inadvertently signal cultural group identity? Educators need to be sensitive to the differences in what they mean to say and what may be actually heard.

Be aware of your own biases. CCE professionals and local government officials are highly aware of how important trust and neutrality is to their own community role. CaRDI is developing outreach activities to help intermediaries and local leaders recognize and understand the strength of their own ideological biases.

Next Steps

CaRDI was recently funded for a five-year, multi-state project to coordinate research on academia’s role in the maintenance and restoration of clean science communication environments, focusing further on the important role of trusted “intermediaries” that link university faculty, researchers, and local decision makers. We plan to employ the analytic capacities of social network analysis using detailed information on the information chains that link local policy makers to information sources. Controversial and culturally polarizing topics will continue to be the focus as CaRDI investigates our own and others’ practices for their effectiveness in protecting/restoring clean science communication environments when polarizing issues like climate change are involved.

⁴ Paul A. Sabatier (1988) An advocacy coalition framework of policy change and the role of policy-oriented learning therein. *Policy Sciences*, 21(2):129-168

⁵ Dan M. Kahan (2006). “Cultural Cognition and Public Policy,” Faculty Scholarship Series, Yale Law School Legal Repository, Paper 103, pp149. http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/fss_papers/103

⁶ Howard Gardner. *Changing Minds: The Art and Science of Changing Our Own and Other People’s Minds* Harvard Business School Press, Boston Mass, 2006

