

Successful Meetings

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Successful extension council meetings are not accidental. They are the result of many things, the most important of which is the council members. There is no single source of information on how to conduct successful meetings. Experience, along with a knowledge of fundamentals, should provide the means by which meetings are constantly improved.

Function of meetings

“Why are we here?” “What is the purpose of this meeting?” The council chair and assigned local faculty should keep these questions in mind in planning each meeting.

All extension council meetings should be aimed at the council’s ultimate objective: extending the educational resources and knowledge base of Missouri’s land-grant universities to the people in the county. The result of using educational resources is a better community in which to live, work, raise families and do business. Specific meetings are aimed at accomplishing steps toward this goal.

Virtually every extension council meeting should aim to involve members in the extension council program. A council member who is personally and actively involved will be a more enthusiastic council member.

Getting people involved can be accomplished through work on committees, participation in program planning and in training, and in making a presentation to the council about needs in the community or organizations they represent.

Type of meetings

For the most part, extension council meetings are of four types — meetings of the full council, executive committee meetings, committee meetings and annual meetings.

Full council meetings

The full council is involved in policy making. The meetings are often deliberative in character. Council meetings are devoted to internal operations of the council: budget, election, personnel and the local plan of work. The council determines the annual budget, conducts elections for council members, hires secretaries, approves assignments of professional staff and determines the emphasis to be placed within the local plan of work.

Extension engagement specialists provide support to the council for its internal administration. The policy-making role is reserved for the council, using advice from the University of Missouri on the need for new or updated policies. Council members’ understanding of their responsibilities will help council meetings run smoothly.

Council meetings are typically held on a regular basis — monthly or every other month. Their frequency depends on the workload and local council custom. Meeting dates are set each year at the annual meeting.

The council chair prepares for the council meeting, assisted by council paid staff and local MU Extension faculty/staff. These preparations include planning the agenda, providing public notice and ensuring that all needed materials are presented to council members before the meeting.

Executive committee meetings

The executive committee is comprised of the officers of the extension council. They may meet in months when full council meetings are not held, and they may authorize the payment of bills and conduct other business as delegated to them by the full council.

Committee meetings

Committee meetings serve a different function than council meetings. They may be planning or study meetings. Committee meetings are often the place where policy recommendations are born; however, council policy is not established there. Committees perform studies and develop facts on which policy recommendations may be based, but until the council has approved these recommendations, the organization is not committed to any policy or action.

Annual meetings

Extension council annual meetings differ from committee or council meetings. They are more motivational in approach and often have a social side. Most involve dinners where guests attend.

Some parts of the annual meeting program are required by law, such as the swearing in of officers, setting meeting dates and selecting a financial institution for depositing funds. Other parts occur by tradition and may include featured speakers, program plans for the upcoming years, staff and council recognition, or future council plans. Distribution of the annual report can provide information on the past year's programs.

Preparation and staging

The council chair, working with local faculty, is responsible for preparations that lead to successful meetings.

The agenda

It is essential that the council chair and local faculty confer prior to the council meeting to set the agenda as well as an order of business. Scheduling the most important item first will often help accomplish the meeting's objectives. The council chair should set goals for the time needed for each agenda item, e.g. 20 minutes for committee reports and 15 minutes for unfinished business. This will help keep the meeting moving, yet it can be adjusted if necessary.

A copy of the agenda should be sent to council members far enough in advance so they can prepare to participate in discussions. Copies of the previous meeting's minutes, the financial statement, committee reports and any printed material relating to agenda items should go along with the agenda. If a committee has met the same day as the council meeting, copies of its report should be made and distributed at the meeting.

Supporting materials may be included. For example, if a meeting is called to set next year's budget, each person in attendance should have a record of the past year's expenses and the engagement specialist's estimate of next year's operating costs. If nominations for next year's council candidates are to be discussed, a list of current members, their terms, criteria for selecting candidates and a slate of nominees from the election committee should be available. If the farm fair family is to be selected, a description of the event, previous county representatives and the report from the farm fair family nominating committee should be sent with the agenda.

Agenda building occurs on a day-to-day basis in the extension office where the activities and concerns of all extension staff are incorporated into the monthly agenda. Council members should feel free to bring their concerns and interests for the extension program to be added to the agenda. The most helpful way to do this is by talking to the council chair and engagement specialist prior to the meeting.

Agenda development

A recommended meeting format:

Call to order

- Take attendance
- Recognize visitors
- Approve the agenda

Presentation of reports

- Approve the minutes
- Hear financial reports
- Hear committee reports
- Hear faculty and staff reports
- Business decision making
- Conduct unfinished business
- Ask for new business

Close the meeting

- Make announcements
- Adjourn the meeting

Sending notice

A meeting notice should include specific date, time and place, and should be mailed far enough in advance to permit council members to prepare for the meeting. For special meetings, where a quorum is important, a reply email or phone number for the extension office will help determine how many to expect.

Missouri's Sunshine Law requires a posted meeting notice be prominently posted in the extension office (or courthouse, if appropriate) at least 24 hours prior to the meeting. The notice must include the time, date and place of the meeting; a tentative agenda; and whether the meeting is open or closed.

In certain circumstances, the council may have a closed meeting, record or vote. Closed meetings can be held for matters relating to litigation; lease, purchase or sale of real estate where public knowledge might adversely affect the transaction; hiring, firing, disciplining or promoting of an employee; welfare cases of identifiable individuals; software codes for electronic data processing; individually identifiable personnel records; and records that are protected from disclosure by other law. If a court finds a member of a public governmental body has violated the Sunshine Law, the court may subject the member to a fine of \$5,000 per violation and order payment by such member of all costs and reasonable attorney's fees to any party successfully establishing a violation. The court also may declare void any action taken in violation of the law.