



Unit Leadership: Best Practices for Local Government Relationships

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Introduction

Unit-level leadership positions within Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) carry a wide range of responsibilities. This publication draws from an online seminar series featuring unit leaders from across the state who share their insights, experiences, and guidance on key issues they manage as Unit Coordinators (UCs) or Unit Extension Directors (UEDs).

The content presented here - and in the accompanying tipsheets - is distilled from the *UC Best Practices* seminar series. It is intended to provide practical recommendations and strategies for individuals serving in unit leadership roles.

One key responsibility of VCE unit leader roles is fostering strong relationships and maintaining open communication with local government officials. It is essential that local leaders are kept informed about Extension activities and are included in relevant initiatives whenever possible.

Extension unit leaders should actively engage with local government, support community priorities, and seek opportunities to collaborate on initiatives that align with Extension's mission and the needs of the locality.

Best Practices

- Strategically align VCE programs with the priorities of elected officials and departments.
- Identify key personnel and integrate into other departments to establish formal connections.
- Proactively build relationships with local council members and/or department heads.
- Participate in local leadership and/or department head meetings to gain visibility.

- Highlight program impacts using data that resonates with stakeholders.
- Request local board recognition for awards and achievements.
- Attend board meetings (or view recordings) for situational analysis and strategic planning.
- Leverage your ELC as a formal local committee appointed by the board.
- Share unit/state Extension impacts and annual reports with local departments and elected officials.
- Use the programming that agents conduct in additional localities (outside the unit) to highlight needs and support funding requests to create new positions in those localities.
- Identify influential stakeholders who can champion VCE.
- Explore relevant local committees for VCE representation.
- Request regular meetings with an established local liaison.
- Establish agreed upon performance measures and track data supporting those measures.
- Track and report volunteer service and hours, and use data to leverage local funds.
- Work with unit staff to compile outcome and impact data; be prepared to speak on behalf of VCE for any of your unit's program efforts.
- Prepare an elevator speech for Extension programs and train staff with accurate information so they can be similarly prepared.

Challenges

- Significant time and effort are required to build and maintain relationships with local leaders.
- Units face distinct challenges depending on their organizational structure:
 - Units housed within a local government department often encounter unique obstacles

related to integration, communication, and resource sharing.

- Stand-alone Extension departments may face challenges in establishing visibility, building partnerships, or securing local support.
- Staff turnover creates difficulties with continuity and maintaining strong working relationships. Each transition requires intentional effort to rebuild trust, communication, and integration into existing partnerships.
- Balancing the job requirements in the roles of an extension agent and a unit leader.
- Supporting a UC/UED that is not housed in the local unit (covering multiple units or an interim).
- Units that have city/county relationships and need a way to track outreach/services uniquely.

Removal”, VCE Intranet,

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1NIGhdtVI-71w-NyVePl2ctNmJmbRfh6I/view?usp=sharing>

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Practices to Avoid

- Neglecting the crucial role that unit leaders play in local relationship building.
- Focusing only on one program area.
- Providing services outside the boundaries of the locality supporting the unit office; units may occasionally support regional collaboration or extend program impact beyond the unit. It can complicate local expectations, resource allocation, and accountability.

Support Needs

- Crash course in public administration.
- Clear VCE guidance and expectations for time allocation to UC/UED responsibilities (see *Unit Coordinator Administrative Role & Pay Supplement – Appointment & Removal* document linked in References below).
- Stipends that reflect the additional responsibilities of unit supervisors.
- Mentoring programs for UCs/UEDs.
- Guidance on which local committees to join.

References

Hunnings, J., S. Mahdu, and A. Wood (2021). *VCE Unit Coordinators Responsibilities*. VCE Intranet <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hXHOySto9HLCyYfj7-1Az7VWhTdNhgWs/view>

Johnson, L., 2022. “Unit Coordinator Administrative Role & Pay Supplement – Appointment &