

Advocacy in Sea Grant: A Primer

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WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL WITH ADVOCACY ANYWAY?

Some of our colleagues, especially those new to Sea Grant, often come to us with this question and our answer is much more than, “it’s tradition.” Here are some of the reasons:

- We’re often dealing with *public goods*, those things that we own in common (air quality, water quality, natural resources, fisheries, access to beaches, etc.) where everyone has a stake in how those resources are used.
- If we’re dealing with public goods, no one has more right to them than anyone else.
- As a result the only body that represents everyone allocates them: *our elected officials* (or those who they designate to manage those resources).
- Sea Grant is empowered—and funded—by the US Congress to provide our best scientific information on managing our coastal and marine resources: *public goods*.
- Our elected officials speak for the majority of us and then entrust Sea Grant with giving the public our very best scientific information, so we must not color that information with our own biases.
- It boils down to Sea Grant having an *ethical responsibility* to fairly represent the best science on issues of coastal resource management.

But, aren’t there times when we *should or may advocate* action? Yes, for example:

- If we are implementing an enacted rule or law, we *can be* advocates.
 - Why? Because elected officials (representing the public) have made a decision and embodied it in a law.
 - As honest brokers, we’re informing the public about a decision regarding resource management.
- We often *advocate* with respect to *process* even if we do not with respect to *outcomes*.
- Yet, when we advocate for one course of action over another, we are taking a position that the approach will provide an optimal outcome—according to whom? There is a difference between our own predilections and a recommendation based on research or law or legislated or adjudicated policy.

Extension Best Practices

For Sea Grant Extension these standards constitute *best practices*. But there may be other considerations.

Extension with faculty appointments?

- The principles for extension employees who are not faculty members apply to extension faculty as well because it is not a matter of university titles, rather of the ethical responsibility that all extension members have to give unbiased assistance to clients.

Off duty extension employees taking positions on matters in the public sphere?

- Test for propriety of activities outside of work:
 - Is the scope of the matter within the sphere of the employee's normal work?
 - Or, would the position be so closely related to the employee's normal sphere of work that the public might interpret his/her actions as speaking for Sea Grant?
- If the answer is "no" to both questions, advocacy is probably not an issue.

Advocating a new technology?

- The test here is whether there is adequate scientific basis for the technology being advocated.
 - The technology furthers the goal of enhancing wise use of ocean and coastal resources, and
 - The technology is not associated with a particular firm, and
 - There is adequate scientific support for the technology
 - Then, advocacy is probably not be an issue

Conflict of interest and advocacy?

- Is it advocacy when an extension employee has a second source of income in the same field in which he/she provides extension advice?
 - If so, does the extension employee provide assistance in the same specific field in which he/she works?
 - Can the employee specify in a plan of work how his/her outreach activities mitigate against clients interpreting his/her advice to be advocacy?
 - Does the program monitor such outreach to provide a check against advocacy?

Tenured Faculty and Advocacy

How should we evaluate tenured faculty taking advocacy positions?

- Did the researcher fairly represent the findings of the Sea Grant funded research?
 - If he/she went beyond the findings of his/her research to draw conclusions not supported by the research and the position taken is one of an advocate, the behavior is unethical.
 - However, opinions on future states of the environment not attributable to Sea Grant research are certainly within the purview of academic freedom.
- What about academic freedom?
 - Sea Grant funded researchers, whether tenured faculty or not have an ethical responsibility to their colleagues not to exceed the findings and conclusions of that research when presenting their results because advocacy unsupported by the findings nevertheless bears the imprimatur of Sea Grant as the funding agency with the potential to damage not only the credibility of the researcher and institution but also Sea Grant as a public source of science research funds.

- Does academic freedom trump ethics when the niceties of academic freedom may not be honored outside the academy? This becomes a political and ethical question.

Advocacy and the Media

The media are interested in a story for their readers and are often one of our best means of providing outreach to large numbers of the public. But, the media are at once our facilitators and at the same time our nemesis because they have an agenda, too. Following are some thoughts about dealing with the media and advocacy.

- Our friends in the media want a story and one in which the public will be interested but it is incumbent on researchers, extension and communications staff to be wary.
- In preparation for contact with the media:
 - Be clear about what the science says and be prepared to explain it clearly and accurately—practice beforehand
 - Remember that the media wants a story but the focus should be on what you, the interviewee, has to say rather than answering questions from the media that may lead off the topic
 - Do not speculate about topics in which you have limited or no expertise (even if it is flattering to be asked)
 - Do your best to redirect off-topic questions back to the science and legitimate findings
 - Off-topic and ill-informed answers can cause difficulty for interviewees and for the Sea Grant Program when misstatements of fact need to be “walked back” by administrators or interviewees

Advocacy and Public Service

Faculty and extension faculty have an obligation to perform public service and in that role both are often asked their opinion on matters of public importance. Moreover, the role of an elected or appointed public official is specifically to make a decision on public matters coming before them. Even serving on the board of a non-profit organization requires decisions to be made on issues of policy for the constituency of that organization. How should we decide how to manage advocacy in these situations?

- Taking on a public role requires vigilance about one’s own personal integrity
 - If an issue of public concern arises that is related to one’s own area of expertise, remember that your utterances will be taken as reflecting the position of the Sea Grant Program and university, especially in smaller communities where you are well known.
 - If a decision is required from you that differs from established science, state that this is your opinion (a brief disclaimer such as: “my position is somewhat different from that of other researchers/the research”).
 - A good example of this kind of issue might be, for example, whether a beach should be replenished. These are often fraught decisions with coastal property owners eager for replenishment, the science often arguing against it and the public officials exactly in the middle of that question. If you are the public official you have a

responsibility to make a decision but it may differ from established scientific principles. Be clear with the public about the rationale for your decision and with your colleagues (both on the board and in the university) as to whose interests you represent.

- Public service is an honor and those who are elected or appointed have an ethical responsibility to their constituents who chose them as their representatives.
 - When serving as a public official, be careful to explain differences between your position as that official and your research activities; i.e. that as a public official your primary responsibility is to represent the views of your constituents.
 - Making such a distinction will inevitably be difficult with some coastal and marine resource management issues.

Resources

Following are examples of scientific integrity policies from agencies that support scientific research. None are necessarily governing over research funded through Sea Grant but rather provide sources of guidance for a variety of situations where advocacy could become an issue. Pielke is a political scientist at the University of Colorado. Oreskes is a historian at Harvard University.

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