

# ASSOCIATION OF SEA GRANT EXTENSION PROGRAM LEADERS

STATEMENT ON ADVOCACY  
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## Background

*ád-vo-ca-cy, n.* (15<sup>th</sup> Century): the act or process of advocating or supporting a cause or proposal<sup>1</sup>

Congress commissioned the National Sea Grant College Program in 1966 to be of assistance to the nation's marine and maritime community. Throughout its forty-plus years of history, the nation's Sea Grant Programs have wrestled with how best to assist those living along the coast and working in the marine environment. Sea Grant endeavors to provide the best science and policy information available while remaining neutral about whether and how to apply that knowledge in the development of public policies. This neutral stance seeks to prevent Sea Grant from becoming a partisan in public policy discussions over how to use the information produced by its affiliated academic institutions. Admittedly, this has been and continues to be a challenge. Academic faculty and Sea Grant professionals developing and providing information are a highly educated group with well-developed views. Nevertheless, Congress charged Sea Grant with providing our best information to *all* citizens who seek our help. A concurrent obligation is to keep our distance from positions advocating how that information is used.

The National Sea Grant College Program Act<sup>2</sup> establishes guidance when Congress finds and declares that the national interest requires a strategy to "provide for the understanding and wise use of ocean, coastal, and Great Lakes resources and the environment." The thirty-two Sea Grant programs representing the coastal and Great Lakes states and U.S. Territories, therefore, work to enhance the "wise use" and conservation of coastal, marine and Great Lakes resources. Our Congressional mandate, however, begs the question – what does it mean to "provide for the understanding and wise use"? This question is open to interpretation and answers may vary among Sea Grant programs, their constituents, and other stakeholders. We would argue, however, that to "provide for the understanding and wise use" means informing the policy debate through the provision of the best science, socio-economic, and policy information available.

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam Webster's *Collegiate Dictionary*, 10<sup>th</sup> Ed. 2001. Springfield, MA: Merriam Webster, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> 33 USC §1121(b)

What follows are ideas about how we as outreach professionals can both honor the congressional charge and participate in the public debate, yet avoid becoming partisans in that debate.

### What is neutrality?

No one expects that researchers or outreach professionals will not have opinions over how the research we generate and/or provide to the public is utilized; after all, we are all seeking some level of truth. Neither should the public expect that we lack a sense of ownership or commitment to the research we have conducted to reach our conclusions. However, it is not our role to decide which of the science or policy alternatives should ultimately be implemented on a federal, state, or local level. In our own minds we may be quite certain that a particular policy alternative is in the best interest of the public; nevertheless, there are other voices that have a right to be heard, even if they lack our scientific sophistication. All of which brings us to the question of why neutrality is so important.

### The importance of neutrality

Policy experts describe as “public goods” many of the resources Sea Grant professionals engage. The allocation of public goods is, by definition, not possible through a market, thus government—the one body that represents all the putative owners of those goods—must make those decisions. What other body would represent the interests of everyone with a stake in clean air and water, for example? Using Garrett Hardin’s view of these resources as a “commons” helps to further illuminate the problem. Because a commons is open to all, overuse will destroy it for all as well. In this setting, no entity should have the right to overuse the resource or to dictate use of the commons; instead only a body that fairly represents the views and needs of the public can exercise that responsibility.

In application then, Sea Grant professionals have been given the opportunity to seek out the science and transform it into policy choices, but not dictate its use. The decisions about which policy choices to select falls to our representatives in government, who should consider our best professional views but who concurrently have an obligation also to listen to the public who elected them.

### Lobbying

One aspect of advocacy is lobbying and we want to make a distinction here between the two behaviors. While lobbying is a form of advocacy, not all advocacy is lobbying. The two terms should not be used interchangeably. Lobbying involves “conduct[ing] activities aimed at influencing public officials and especially members of a legislative body on legislation.”<sup>3</sup> As recipients of federal funding, Sea Grant extension agents are prohibited from expending funds on

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lobbying>.

activities that attempt to influence the outcome of any federal, state, or local election or the introduction, enactment, or modification of any federal or state legislation.<sup>4</sup> While Sea Grant extension agents may not engage in lobbying, not all communications with public officials regarding pending legislation is prohibited. Sea Grant extension agents may share expertise and knowledge with public officials, *at their request*, through presentations, testimony, and reports.

What about in our private lives? Can a Sea Grant extension agent, in the evening and on the weekends, write letters to her Congressmen or organize a political rally? Of course. As individuals we are free to fully participate in the political debate. But, should we? Many of us live in the communities in which we work and the line between professional and personal is often blurry. Clientele who discover that their agent is working on a political campaign on the weekends might begin to wonder whether there is a political agenda behind the information the agent provides. Although it may involve a personal sacrifice, as a “best practice” Sea Grant extension agents should avoid becoming involved in political advocacy either professionally or personally if their identification with a campaign or candidate is likely to adversely affect their professional delivery of services.

#### Researcher neutrality and academic freedom

Some may protest, “but your proposal flies in the face of academic freedom to explore issues where they take us.” Sea Grant’s neutrality, however, does not limit the prerogatives of researchers; rather, it restrains Sea Grant professionals from promoting a particular *application* of research that the scientist or policy analyst must relinquish to the representatives of the public affected by its use. Consider Einstein’s reaction to the use of his research to build and deploy a nuclear weapon in World War II, “I made one great mistake in my life... when I signed the letter to President Roosevelt recommending that atom bombs be made; but there was some justification - the danger that the Germans would make them.”<sup>5</sup>

#### Advice and neutrality

Can Sea Grant professionals provide advice and still remain neutral? We believe that is possible. Aaron Wildavsky, one of the foremost thinkers in the field of policy analysis, provides some guidance for translating advice (into which much of scientific discovery evolves) to policy:

The demand for analysis depends upon the desire for competition in the giving of advice. There must be more than one alternative; they must come from more than a single source; and there must be sufficient

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<sup>4</sup> OMB Circular A-21, sec. J(28).

<sup>5</sup> Clark, R. 1971, 1984. *Einstein: The Life and Times*. New York: HarperCollins, Avon Books. P. 752.

dispersion of power in society so that competing sources of advice have a chance of being heard and acted upon.<sup>6</sup>

The utilitarian philosopher, John Stuart Mill provides a similar but earlier (1859) view when he tells us that, “There is the greatest difference between presuming an opinion to be true because, with every opportunity for contesting it, it has not been refuted, and assuming its truth for the purpose of not permitting its refutation.”<sup>7</sup> Academic peer review invites refutation of scientific findings; in the same manner, data and policy applications must be open to review and refutation in the public square to gain legitimacy as public policy.

### Non-advocacy as a “best practice”

While it is tempting to assume the role of an advocate because we identify with the issue at stake, have devoted ourselves to the study of an issue for years, or have a personal predilection for the position, we need to remain conscious of the public trust that we bear in our work. While we all may at times step over the line into advocacy, the knowledge of our responsibility to all citizens should draw us back from the brink when we find ourselves becoming more than good researchers and educators. Not only is our own credibility at stake when we take partisan positions but that of our funding agency as well.

### Taint by association with an issue

When ideological opponents of our research or outreach portray our work as “advocacy” merely because we are associated with an idea that may be controversial in some circles, our response must be that we are professional educators. This is particularly true over issues such as global climate change where skeptics have questioned our roles as scientists by challenging the science. By involving ourselves in the discussion have we become advocates? Research and public education about matters of public importance does not make us advocates. Quite the contrary, we have a responsibility to conduct research and go where the findings take us and do our best to educate the public about current science affecting our Great Lakes and marine resources.

In fact, we have both technical and ethical responsibilities to translate our understanding of natural and anthropogenic processes affecting our marine and Great Lakes ecosystems into language that the public can use to advise their elected representatives as they seek to manage these environments. If our understanding of these processes has implications for public policy, all the better. Congress developed the Sea Grant College Program to help the nation better manage its marine and coastal resources. To accomplish that objective we need

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<sup>6</sup> Wildavsky, Aaron. 1979. *Speaking Truth to Power: The Art and Craft of Policy Analysis*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., p. xxvii.

<sup>7</sup> Collini, Stefan (Ed.). 1989. *J.S. Mill: On Liberty and Other Writings*. London: University of Cambridge Press, p. 22.

to know and be involved in all manner of issues surrounding coastal, ocean and Great Lakes management.

Unpopularity of an idea is no justification for avoiding it when science detects a problem. In such situations, however, it becomes all the more important to be aware of competing points of view—as there will inevitably be—when seeking to educate the public about issues affecting their welfare. Sea Grant extension professionals should remember that while we are frequently involved in controversial issues, as long as scientific findings are the foundation for our positions we have an obligation to forge ahead in research and in public outreach.

#### A policy or “best practice?”

No funding agency, NOAA or otherwise, may prohibit university personnel from becoming advocates. In their work, however, Sea Grant professionals ought to refrain from advocating as a “best practice” out of professional and ethical responsibility. Each of us is human and we do not always hew to the best practices of our professions. But, when matters of our nation’s oceans, Great Lakes and coastal environment are at stake, we have a particular responsibility to abide by “best practices” of professional behavior.

One of those best practices is adherence to the NOAA Code of Scientific Conduct found within the NOAA Administrative Order on Scientific Integrity. All recipients of NOAA funding should, to the best of their ability, be

- **Honest** in all aspects of scientific effort;
- **Accountable** in the conduct of research and interpretation of research results;
- **Professional, courteous, and fair** in working with others and respectful of the ideas of others;
- **Good stewards** of research on behalf of others.

As extension agents, we have a professional responsibility to ensure that we do not use or disseminate scientific information in a manner that distorts scientific findings to reinforce personal positions. In short, to be a partisan or advocate invites us to assume the infallibility of our position at the expense of forging a more robust—but evolutionary—position on the anvil of public discourse, an evolution that may more nearly meet the needs of the public.