

research in brief

Budget Politics

Could we identify the one most single important factor in implementing Extension's programs? Is it having motivated staff, meeting people's needs, having the latest research information, or is it our budget? Many think it's the latter.

Quality Extension programs depend on money for employing skilled, motivated people, developing quality instructional material, traveling, and back-up support.

The amount of legislatively appropriated dollars makes up a big part of Extension's budget. That's the key assumption to Stewart's research. Stewart studied the politics related to the setting of Extension's federal budget in fiscal year 1979. His study and conclusions would be good reading for all Extension faculty, program leaders, and administrators.

He interviewed 40 people, including 14 congressional staff members, 14 USDA officials, 4 CES officials, 2 OMB officials, 3 association executives, 2 Extension evaluation specialists, and 1 person from the 95th Congress. He also reviewed documents and attended hearings and committee meetings.

His findings include:

1. The process started August 2, 1976, when the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) developed its initial budget recommendations, and lasted till October 11, 1978, when President Carter signed the Agriculture Appropriations Bill (over 2 years officially, not to mention all the unofficial and historical influences on the budget).
2. The amount of the Extension appropriation was substantially influenced by the *indirect* as well as the direct congressional appropriations mechanisms.

3. Congressional staff are extremely important, with the senatorial staff generally having more power than their house counterparts.
4. Documented research on Congress shows that the essential work of appropriations committees is accomplished by subcommittees. These decisions are generally the most important in the entire process.
5. Out of 14 environmental factors influencing the budget process, only one—"the well of goodwill toward Extension"—was judged having a positive influence. Three factors were neutral and 10 factors were negative. The latter included Proposition 13, zero base budgeting, the threat of a veto, USDA reorganization, the American Agricultural Movement "Spring Offensive," the state of the U.S. economy, and the "Hard Tomatoes Syndrome," an aggregation of attitudes stemming from Hightower's book *Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times*, which was quite critical of Extension.
6. The Extension grass-roots model works well in working with the legislative branch of government on appropriations and accountability, but not the executive branch (USDA and OMB).
7. Though Extension has historically done well in getting new appropriations, its dollars have decreased 18% in the past 6 years when inflation is taken into account.

In his recommendations, Stewart said definite changes in strategy and leadership approaches are needed if Extension is to enjoy continued budget support. To get support, Extension can no longer rely on officials acting on descriptive terms like, "we help people help themselves," or "we're a living legend," or "we are the miracle of volunteer leaders," or that Extension is "the flower of continuing Jeffersonian principles." These are taken as "overused" generalizations, reinforce a stereotype that Extension is living in the past, and may come across as "cornball" terms to sophisticated people in the executive branch.

Rather, more specific program proposals, evaluation methods, and accountability strategies need to be developed and used by Extension in the future.

"Cooperative Extension, The Carter Administration, and the 95th Congress: An Empirical Model of the Politics of Appropriations." David W. Stewart. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1979. Laverne Forest