

September 12, 1994

TO: Teen Assessment Program Staff
FROM: John Lande
RE: Report on Process of the TAP Program, 1989-1994

Attached is a report on the process of conducting various aspects of the TAP Program during the first five years. It is based on interviews with Extension agents and I suspect that much of this will be quite familiar for you. Even if it simply confirms what you already know, this may be valuable for you. Hopefully you will find details or simply the organized presentation of agents' responses to be helpful.

As with the impact report, the data for this report is primarily qualitative. Although I have calculated a few tallies, you will see that the information is largely impressionistic because of the open-ended nature of the questions and answers, and thus when I have coded and counted responses, the numbers are not to be interpreted as being precise. Also note that there is "missing data" for some questions because they were added or omitted after conducting some interviews, or because they were not directly asked or answered in particular interviews. Thus when I do report tallies, the number of responses varies for different questions.

This report is divided into four major sections. The first section deals with working relationships between agents, with staff in Madison, with TAP committees, and in dealing with conflict. The second section covers how the counties analyzed, disseminated, and used TAP data in developing action plans. It also discusses why the data were used as much as they were and why they were not used more. The third section summarizes agents' comments about what is important to make the process work successfully. The fourth section describes a possible strategy for dealing with community conflicts about TAP.

Because I had little information about how TAP worked other than from these interviews, I am not in a position to reach firm conclusions or make definite recommendations. This report includes some speculations about possible interpretations and some tentative suggestions. However, I leave it to you to reach your own conclusions and evaluations about what changes, if any, would be appropriate to pursue, given the available alternatives and their implications.

You may wish to circulate a copy of this report to the agents to acknowledge their help and suggestions and to stimulate discussion about possible improvements in the process.

I hope that you find this report to be useful. I would be interested in your reactions.

[Note re Stone Soup: To preserve confidentiality, letters are substituted for names.]

THE PROCESS OF THE TAP PROGRAM, 1989-1994

This report summarizes information provided by University Extension (UWEX) agents in 28 counties (plus one coordinator for an Indian school district) regarding the process of planning, implementing, and following up Teen Assessment Project (TAP) surveys in Wisconsin.

1. Working Relationships

A. Relations Between Family Living Agents and 4H-Youth Agents

In almost all the counties, both family living agents and 4H-youth agents shared the work to some extent. In 12 counties, the agents interviewed said that the family living agents did more of the work and in nine counties, they reported that the work was divided roughly equally. Note that some of the predominance of family living agents was a reflection of turnover of 4H agents who were either not there or just on their way in or out of the agency. (Most of my interviews were done with family living agents, so that may skew the responses somewhat in the direction of their taking more credit. However, as a group, the agents seemed quite willing to share credit, so I suspect that these numbers provide a fairly accurate picture.)

Collaborating on TAP generally improved relationships between UWEX agents. In 16 counties, working on TAP reportedly improved relationships between agents, in seven counties no change was reported, and in two counties the agents reported that working on TAP harmed the relationships. Contrary to my expectation, the reported effect on agents' relationships was not related to whether the work was divided equally or not. Also note that in some of the "no change" counties, the agents said that their relationship was already pretty good, so the overall picture from my interviews is very positive.

One can question to what extent, if any, the responses were influenced by the fact that the interviews were conducted by someone sponsored by UWEX-Madison authorities. One agent (who reported that TAP hurt her relationship with another agent in her office) stated that there was "major dissension by all the family living agents in all counties that youth agents were not more involved." Of course, this view may be colored by her own experience and/or the kind of talk that family living agents may do with each other. I leave it to you to evaluate the conflicting accounts.

B. Relations Between County Agents and University Extension Staff in Madison

There were generally very positive reports about working with the UWEX staff in Madison, although there were many comments about slow response times. The responses in 18 counties could be characterized as mostly positive, five as mostly negative, and two as evenly mixed. Although the overall response was positive, comments from agents in at least 11 counties complained about slow response time;

only three comments referred to it as positive or adequate. They frequently tempered these comments about time problems with sympathy for staff in Madison and suggestions that the problem was due to insufficient staffing levels.

Here are some of the more positive comments:

"Excellent. ... Sometimes we played telephone tag, but generally just wonderful."

"They did a nice job in helping critique [my work]. Initially X was short of staff to help statewide. ... It wasn't his fault. Basically they were very good in letting you know who else had done it before and providing advice."

"Y was very good in giving advice and critiquing the reports."

"The support when there were potential problems was wonderful. [Apparently she was especially referring to X.] Kudos to them."

"X and Z had done some inservice work on analyzing printouts. We were given a time frame when the data would be returned and it actually came in early."

"Y was very helpful in rewriting the canned report to reflect local findings."

"X and Z were there to help interpret the data when I needed help."

"People were very cooperative. Y and Z really made a positive effort. I have no complaints."

"I was surprised that Z was very accessible and came as often as she did. She was very patient working with the participants and was very open in dealing with people's questions and reservations. She worked very hard. The distance was difficult but she traveled a lot and stayed overnight."

"As I wrote the report, Y was very helpful in reviewing it, which increased my confidence. I appreciated the support. On two occasions, X spent an hour [helping me figure out] what I wanted to say and what strategy to use."

"[Z] got back [to me] quickly and I got a good response."

"X came when I had problems and, for example, appeared on a [local] radio show."

Some comments were critical. As you will see, some of these comments were from agents who went through the process earlier on or as new report formats were introduced, before some of the bugs had been worked out.

"At times I got the sense that there's a belief [by the staff in Madison] that we know nothing about research in the field. [It's as if they believe that they are] the experts and we know nothing about it. After we put the survey together, they asked why we wanted to ask the questions on the survey and get particular analyses. If it is truly a joint project, shouldn't we have some say as to what goes in?"

"Nobody is ever there. Getting phone calls returned has been frustrating and slow. I never received feedback on [one] report. X said that he would help write a newsletter - it was incomplete and confusing for some people."

"For the most part, things were working well. [The Madison office was] shorthanded. ... There was a long wait for the data, which was frustrating. ... I wanted more crosstabs [than I could get]. They did what they could with the staff that they had, but it was frustrating."

"We needed more support in doing the analysis. I would have liked to have support to do additional analysis after getting the first analysis, which was just a superficial slice of the data. It was initially frustrating because it was hard to get ahold of staff, though I think that this has been addressed by getting more staff."

"Writing the reports always took more time than I thought. I always had a time problem giving staff [enough] time to review and approve the report. I had more time in the summer when people in Madison may have had less time. This is not a criticism of staff, just not a realistic understanding of the time. Sometimes you had to know the right questions to ask to get the help. For example, I didn't know that I could request the results according to grade as well as by sex."

"[The staff in Madison] could use more sense of the timeliness of the need for data."

"I heard about problems in other counties, such as one where there was a big question about the Hatch Amendment and they were not getting the answers they needed. The staff in Madison didn't understand how serious a problem this was and gave a flip response."

"They provided valuable help ... but I did wonder how carefully they reviewed the report because we noticed errors. The second time [we did TAP], I wished there had been more careful review because it was a new report style. I would like them to understand the importance of getting the results back within the school year. That means helping agents develop a realistic timeline both for the agent and Madison."

Some of the complaints may be inevitable given your constraints. You can consider what, if anything, you can realistically do to address the concerns expressed by the agents.

C. Relations with TAP Committees

It appears that about two-thirds of the committees or groups that sponsored TAP surveys had existed before the TAP surveys were considered and about one-third of the committees were created specifically to conduct the TAP surveys. Some of these groups were not formal committees as such but apparently were collections of individuals that the agents would consult and/or seek assistance from as needed. In some cases, there were subcommittees that did much of the work under the general supervision of the larger groups.

In most counties, the agents said that they did the bulk of the work as compared with the committee members. In perhaps one-third of the counties, the agents said that the committees did a substantial amount of work. In a few counties, the committees actually took the lead with agents acting as resource people, facilitators, etc.

These are not precise numbers for these patterns, in part because they do not fall into neat categories. Typically there was a division of labor based on competencies for the tasks required, which varied depending on the phase of the process. When TAP was conducted more than once in a county, the pattern may have shifted so that the committees took more responsibility the second time.

The agents almost universally reported that the committees worked well as a group and that they worked well with their committees. The pre-existing groups usually had developed functional working patterns although in some counties, TAP provided the impetus for reinvigorating moribund groups. Agents frequently cited the interest and motivation of the committee members as important reasons for the success of the committees. In some groups, they also mentioned that a few key individuals played key roles in providing leadership and/or doing the work. In some counties, typically smaller rural counties, agents said that there were relatively few professionals in the area and they "wore several hats" resulting in less energy being available to help than the agents would have liked.

Committees typically included representatives from diverse elements of the community, often including school officials, other youth-serving professionals, law enforcement officials, and members of the clergy, among others. Committees that well represented their communities were able to avoid or deal with problems that might arise. As one agent described it, they did a "force field analysis" determining who might help or hinder their efforts and then developing strategies for achieving their goals. Committees in other counties probably performed this function as well, though possibly not quite so explicitly. Several agents said that having a clergy member or potential opponents on the committee was important in avoiding controversy.

Most of the committees included representatives from the schools. They played critical roles in assessing the acceptability of TAP in the schools, identifying the major players, and approaching them as insiders. Many agents said that this "insider" status was very important. When agents approached the schools, some said that they were perceived as outsiders coming in telling the schools what to do. Many of the school representatives also took responsibility for supervising the administration of the survey. In one county that did TAP twice, the agent reported that the school representatives were lower in the hierarchy the second time and they assumed that their superiors would support TAP the second time. They proceeded without checking with their superiors, predictably leading to some problems. Overall, however, agents reported that coordination with the schools worked very well. Schools were given confidence that UWEX knew what it was doing by having a contract with a specific description of what would happen and who would be responsible for different aspects of the project.

In at least one county, youth were included on the committee. The agent said that their participation was instrumental in getting approval of the survey in the face of resistance by members of the school board and it also enhanced the quality of the survey.

D. Community Conflicts over TAP

In most counties, there was little or no conflict about conducting TAP. Agents reported that there was virtually no conflict over TAP in about 17 counties, relatively minor conflict in about three counties, and substantial conflict in about five counties. There was more conflict in the counties where TAP was conducted earlier in the Program's history. Obviously news of the problems spread to agents around the state. Presumably as a result, in large part, of experience of and advice from agents in other counties and UWEX-Madison staff, agents became more sophisticated in anticipating, avoiding, and deflecting potential controversy (largely through developing representative committees and doing careful political "groundwork" as described above). Moreover, some agents reported not pressing to do TAP in communities where they expected substantial opposition. Thus the level of conflict reported probably understates the level of resistance to TAP that exists in some communities to some extent.

Where conflict did arise, several agents gave accounts of a few well-placed (or really poorly-placed) individuals who took strong positions opposing TAP. Media coverage was also an element of the problem as the press provided a medium for conducting the conflict and a source of concern for the schools who feared, correctly in some cases, that the media would sensationalize the survey results. To address this, at least one agent reported developing a very careful process of releasing information, being sure to provide advance notice to major players.

Offering the opportunity for individuals to opt out of the survey was apparently very helpful in defusing opposition, though many agents said that very few students actually opted out.

Being prepared to answer challenging questions - especially whether survey questions would cause youth to engage in sex or drug abuse - was also mentioned as important in addressing potential conflict. Agents said that providing professional and cogent answers in public forums would not persuade determined opponents who posed the questions but was very important for others in the audiences.

Using TAP with Indian populations raises special concerns. In both cases addressed in my interviews, the communities had felt hurt by prior surveys and resulting media coverage that they felt perpetuated stereotypes. In one community, the non-Indian population was not being surveyed, which led some Indians to question whether they were being "picked on." Thus conducting TAP with Indian populations requires special sensitivity.

I should add a footnote here indicating that on the other side of the "conflict ledger" is the fact that, as indicated in the impact report, agents overwhelmingly reported that TAP helped to strengthen relationships between UWEX and their communities and within local communities more generally.

2. Using TAP Data

A. Analyzing and Disseminating TAP Survey Results

Agents generally said that analyzing and disseminating the survey results worked well. In response to this question, agents for 16 counties gave largely positive responses, agents for seven counties gave largely negative responses, and agents for two counties gave more mixed responses. At least part of this pattern was a function of whether the agent, a member of the local support staff, or someone else in the work group was comfortable working with computers and statistics. An exception to this observation was that some agents who were very comfortable with statistics would have liked to have done more sophisticated analyses.

Many agents responded to this question by discussing the time problems described above. Several agents said that they underestimated how much time it would take to write up the reports, so some of the time problems were not due to bottlenecks in Madison. Thus when delays in Madison did occur, they may have aggravated locally-generated causes for being behind schedule.

Several agents commented that the reports, especially later versions which included more graphics, were very easy to read and thus worked well. Agents also said that it was helpful to use other reports, newsletters, etc. from other counties as models for their own.

Several agents had problems because of incompatible computer software. In one county they used Microsoft Word and had a hard time using models in WordPerfect. Another agent had problems because she was using QuattroPro for graphics but the model she used was in Presentation. In a third county, they received

their information on computer disks and they had a hard time printing out the data because it included some extraneous characters.

Many agents said that they found it helpful to be able to compare their local results with state and national data. The agent in one county said that she did not get state data and so she did not have a standard to help determine whether to be concerned about particular results.

B. Following up on the Data

TAP committees and their communities varied greatly in how much they used the data as a basis for taking action on problems identified in the surveys, though it is hard to quantify this. My impression is that the level of follow-up often, though not always, was related to whether a Youth Futures program was developed in the county. One agent said that her committee did not have any action plan in mind other than increasing awareness. Another said that she would have liked to see more leadership from the state about how results could be used in developing action plan such as prototypes of what could be done with TAP data.

C. Why Data Was Used as Much as it Was

According to the agents, TAP data was used as much as it was because people were interested in the issues, TAP provided a view of the local situation, it was easy to use, and it helped obtain funding. Agents in 14 counties cited the motivation of various people in the community as a reason why the data was used. These included the agents themselves, members of their committees (who had invested the energy to generate the data and did not "want to let it just sit on the shelf"), school officials, community agencies, members of the public, and W.

Agents in 15 counties referred to the fact that the data was based on a survey of their own local youth. It enabled them to gauge how they compared with youth across the state and the country. And, as noted in the impact report, this was helpful in addressing the denial of people who believed that they do not have serious problems in their area. Several agents mentioned that TAP was the first time that this type of data had been collected in their area. One noted that members of their community had designed the survey themselves and the data was school-specific so that it was especially useful.

Agents also said that the data was useful in grantwriting, especially since schools need this kind of information to apply for Drug-Free School funding.

Several agents also noted that the reports were easy to use and they covered a wide variety of issues, unlike some other surveys that deal only with alcohol and other drug abuse (AODA) issues.

D. Why the Data Was Not Used More

When asked why TAP data was not used more than it was, agents gave a variety of responses. The most frequent were concerns about adverse publicity and controversy (10 counties) as well as lack of time (nine counties). One agent said that there was fear that parents might react with denial: "it's not my kid doing it." Another agent said that school administrators "weren't willing to rock the political boat by saying that they needed to do more on sexuality." One said that the results would be interpreted as "the school pointing a finger at itself." Others expressed the fear that the media would sensationalize the findings and blow them out of proportion. Several agents mentioned that they worked in conservative counties, implying that the findings would not be well received there. Controversies in other counties had a ripple effect chilling efforts to disseminate the information more. One agent said that she and her committee weren't brave enough to take a higher profile such as having a large public forum.

When agents referred to the lack of time, they generally referred to their own time or that of the TAP committees and other professionals in the community. As one agent put it, "it was an already busy group of people that didn't have the time or energy to rally the forces to get the data out." Another agent explained that she was only one person and would have liked more help from the 4H agent. In some cases, the agents referred to inappropriate timing for taking more action. One agent also referred to parents' lack of time to get more involved because they are so busy working and because the problem is not perceived as big enough. Indeed, in at least five counties, agents indicated that these issues were not perceived as very important either because the survey findings apparently did not indicate high levels of at-risk behaviors, other issues were considered higher priorities, or these issues just were not considered that important in themselves.

Interestingly, only two agents indicated that lack of funding inhibited action on the results; of course, more funding presumably would buy more time, which was identified as a reason that more was not done.

A few agents mentioned other reasons including staff turnover, lack of clear goals within the TAP committee, and poor working relationships among community agencies.

When asked how they would have liked to have seen the data used more, agents for nine counties referred to some type of further dissemination of the information, usually through the channels already used in various counties. One agent also said that she would like to see more information sharing on the state level with the Department of Public Instruction and to have more co-sponsorships at the state level. Agents in seven counties mentioned additional programs in the community. A few mentioned changes in the schools or greater use in fundraising.

3. Agents' Recommendations

I asked agents how they would handle the problems that they experienced if they arose again (or what enabled them to work through those problems in the past) and what advice they would give others planning to do TAP. This section summarizes their responses to these questions for your analysis.

A. Advice and Support

Agents in nine counties cited the importance of getting good advice, especially from someone who has already done TAP. Given the problems in some counties, some agents expressed apprehension and one said that having backup from others in the state made it possible to proceed.

One of the first agents to do TAP said that she did a fair amount of advising of agents in other counties. She said that she was glad to help but it took time away from other things she could be doing. This suggests the idea of identifying a number of agents who might be designated as mentors, thus dividing the workload and presumably giving them recognition in their own workload accounting. This might also relieve some of the pressure on staff in Madison who have apparently been shorthanded at least at times. An additional or alternative strategy mentioned by several agents would be to hire additional staff in Madison.

One agent said that the manual does not adequately explain the process to new agents and several suggested the need for (more) inservice trainings to prepare them better. Topics suggested by various agents include logistics of doing TAP, working with the statistics, translating the results into action more effectively, and documenting impacts from the TAP process. The suggestion to provide training in using statistical software for interested agents might help relieve the pressure on the staff in Madison and provide agents the opportunity to do more refined statistical analysis than is now possible.

Several agents commented on the value of seeing products from other counties, suggesting the possibility of assembling a kit of such models if one does not already exist.

Some agents noted the value of having a longer tenure in their position and established relationships in their county rather than having new agents undertake this as one of their first projects. On the other hand, one agent said that this would be a good way to develop relationships and thus might be a good experience for a new agent, depending on the agent and the community. Similarly, one agent suggested doing TAP in only one site the first time and doing more or all of the interested districts after having gone through the experience once.

B. Planning

Planning enough time was emphasized by agents in nine counties. One agent said that agents should recognize that it will take more time than they plan for. (For example, one said that snow days caused problems in moving questionnaires from one school to another.) Another said, "Run your timetable by Madison and add several months to whatever you agree to with Madison. It takes longer [than expected] both in Madison and locally." One counseled checking on the travel schedules of the staff in Madison so that counties are not stalled when they need people in Madison at critical times.

One agent suggested doing the planning in one year and conducting the survey in the following year. Another emphasized the importance of disseminating the results in the same year as the survey is conducted; thus the survey would need to be administered early in the school year. (Of course, if all counties did that, it would obviously aggravate any workload and bottleneck problems in Madison.) On the other hand, one agent said that the data does not go out of date that quickly, so slower dissemination may not be quite so critical.

Several agents said that their committees should have an idea of what they would like to do to follow up on the survey results; indeed, one agent (who was frustrated that little follow-up was done in her county) said that one should do TAP only if there is a commitment in advance to do some follow up. Although it is not possible to know in advance what the survey results will be and what community responses would be considered most appropriate, agents can be prepared with an expectation that some follow-up activities would be undertaken and a list of options to consider. Agents in at least one county have developed such a list; it may be worthwhile to expand and circulate the list.

C. Community Support

Agents in 15 counties talked about the importance of having good support in their communities, especially in the TAP committees. As noted above, one agent said that her committee found it very useful to do an explicit "force field analysis," figuring out who might help or hinder their efforts and then developing strategies to take advantage of those who might help and avoid or deal with those who might hinder their efforts. As one said, "once you have [your community's] support, it goes a lot easier." Several agents described problems due to lack of interest by various players including school districts that did not particularly want the data as well as committee members and other UWEX agents who were not committed to making the process work properly. Agents said that part of the process of maintaining support is regular communication keeping the players informed and welcoming their input.

Committee members need to be, in the words of one agent, "people who will stand behind the process and will stand on the firing line when it gets hot." Including potential opponents on the committee may help avoid or defuse conflict over the

survey. The flip side of this, mentioned by one agent, was to be sure to share credit between agents and with school districts and others as appropriate.

Agents said that it was important to have a good cross-section of people on their steering committees. Suggestions included representatives from schools (especially guidance counselors and AODA coordinators), social service agency staff, law enforcement officials, clergy members, other professionals (such as nurses), parents, and students. As described above, it is important to have savvy and/or well-connected representatives from the schools to smooth the processes of gaining school approval and administering the survey. Several agents emphasized the value of having teens on their committees, something that apparently has not occurred in most counties.

Several agents said that it was important to allocate the work so that it did not fall on just one or two people (often the agents themselves).

Several agents noted the importance of regularly informing the county board of supervisors, especially the members of the committee overseeing University Extension, in advance of key events and securing their support and approval. One agent pointed out that officials may receive queries from the press or constituents; officials generally do not like to be surprised and do appreciate having the information requested so that they can answer questions intelligently. If possible, indication of support by the board of supervisors or their committees should appear as part of the minutes of their meetings or otherwise in writing.

A veteran of an unpleasant political experience over TAP advised that agents should "really know the political atmosphere, not only what it is right now, but also what elections are coming up because things can really change." In addition to the board of supervisors, this advice would also apply to school board members and possible personnel changes of key school administrators.

Several agents commented on problems with media coverage that can disturb the entire political environment with sensational coverage (e.g., headlines such as "Teens Have Sex in XYZ County"). Agents said that they need to be aware of a tendency in the media to focus on sensational aspects of stories to gain an audience. This suggests the need to write press releases carefully and to work closely with local reporters and editors. Moreover, agents need to be prepared to respond, or preferably have influential people in their community respond, if opponents launch attacks through the media. Some agents thought that responding in the media would aggravate the controversies, so the advice is to develop a media plan, which may or may not involve public responses to attacks.

One agent said that an important part of the process of gaining community support is offering parents the opportunity to look at the survey in advance and being prepared to answer questions directly and respectfully.

One person also said that it was important to have the people administering the survey be familiar to the students.

D. Survey Questions

Several agents said that they would have liked to add questions to surveys on topics not now covered adequately or at all. These include questions about HIV, tobacco use, curfews, eating disorders, crime, violence, gangs, and more specific questions about drug usage. Although committees in individual counties can add questions on such topics, it might be useful to identify areas of concern not now adequately covered and generate some standard questions on those topics. This seems to lend itself to being done on a statewide level because of the technical nature of question writing and the value of having standardized questions that would permit comparisons across counties.

4. Possible Strategy for Dealing with Community Conflict Over TAP

As I was writing this report, I was intrigued by the conflicts that have arisen over TAP and the methods for dealing with them. As you may know, my work for more than a decade has focused on the handling of conflicts. My impression from my interviews with the Extension agents is that after some of the TAP pioneers got caught in tough conflicts, agents who later did TAP learned to prevent conflicts by skillfully building political coalitions or by avoiding districts where they encountered resistance. One agent counseled that if there is conflict, "don't touch it with a ten-foot pole." Even when communities conducted TAP surveys, agents reported that they and their TAP committees felt anxious about including questions on sensitive topics and publicizing the results. As one agent put it, she wondered whether she should "put her neck on the line."

Based on my interviews, it appears that, overall, the agents and their colleagues generally did a remarkably successful job in avoiding, preventing, or defusing conflicts, perhaps as successful as possible under the circumstances. Unfortunately, it appears that a legacy of the conflicts has been apprehension and avoidance that may have prevented UWEX from realizing some potential benefits from TAP.

This section outlines a tentative strategy you might consider for addressing this problem. As described below, the strategy involves some real costs and risks, so it should not be undertaken lightly. On the other hand, it has the potential for significantly shifting the dynamics in some counties and perhaps in the state overall. Decisions whether and how to implement such a strategy require political intelligence that you and your colleagues probably have. Moreover, some of these ideas may already have been used through Youth Futures processes or independently by extension agents. That is why this is offered only tentatively, subject to your knowledge of past efforts and assessment of likely future feasibility.

Basically the strategy calls for efforts to increase community consensus around issues addressed by the TAP surveys. It involves structured discussions, conducted in private, between people identified as having strongly differing views on these issues. It might be used when a committee anticipates resistance, either when it is planning to conduct the survey or after it has analyzed the data and wants to develop an action plan. The committee might suggest that a mediator try to help TAP proponents and opponents better understand and respect each others' perspectives, identify areas of common interest, and develop plans that promote those interests (or at least do not violate each's deep interests).

There seem to be obvious areas of common interest, namely concern about the welfare of the community's youth and at least a general agreement that it is preferable that they avoid or minimize risky behaviors. If the process could help (potential) antagonists just establish that mutual recognition, it might be a substantial advance and hopefully would reduce the level of antagonism. It might also lay the groundwork for a cooler discussion of how these concerns might be addressed, where there are likely to be sharper differences. Agents could use the process to show that TAP has been done successfully in so many similar communities without the adverse consequences that opponents fear. TAP committees might also adjust their plans to avoid or minimize elements that opponents find most objectionable. The potential benefits include a much stronger community consensus and more effective strategies to deal with identified problems.

The mediation process simply involves one or more impartial people who structure discussions to help people hear and respect each other and try to reach agreement about things they initially disagree about. Typically, mediators spend some time meeting separately with each side as well as in joint meetings. Variations of the mediation process have been used successfully in virtually every kind of dispute imaginable. Sometimes the word "mediation" causes people to feel anxious because it may suggest that they are in a harsh conflict where adversarial lines have been clearly drawn. You may prefer to simply use the term discussion with an impartial facilitator or discussion leader.

There are some risks. There is no guarantee that mediation would produce an agreement or even the kind of mutual respect I mentioned. In this context, it could galvanize opposition, divert precious time and energy of agents and TAP committees, derail plans to conduct or follow up on TAP surveys leading to reduced services for youth, and damage community relationships as well as individual careers. These problems are most likely to occur if the mediation is undertaken in the midst of a crisis, under heavy time pressure, and without sufficient preparation. At this point, I would not suggest trying mediation under such circumstances even though these are situations where it might be needed most.

Instead, I would suggest considering mediation more as a preemptive strategy before conflict has become overt, public positions have been staked out, and emotions have run high. I would suggest it after a committee has done something like a "force

field analysis" and determined that some major players and their constituencies might be opposed but also might be open to dialogue if approached early and with the proper attitude. Although there would still be risks, they should be smaller under these circumstances.

The potential benefit for the TAP program statewide would be at least partial reversal of a pattern and lore of intense conflict. If you were to use this strategy, I would suggest starting with relatively "easy" conflicts to develop a track record of success in directly engaging potential opponents. Early experiences of success could provide models of processes and substantive agreements that might encourage TAP proponents and opponents in other counties to try it.

Part of what prompted me to think about these ideas was a presentation I observed by a mediator and some pro-life and pro-choice believers. As I recall the presentation, although the process did not change anyone's ultimate convictions, it helped participants understand and respect each others' perspectives better and eliminate the challenges to each others' legitimacy. The issue of abortion and the issues involved in TAP all touch deep feelings of right and wrong so it is not surprising that they stimulate intense emotions at times. Although the TAP issues are not practically reconcilable in some communities and probably not worth the effort of mediation, these issues are open to many creative solutions as agents have demonstrated around the state.

Many people ask why mediators are needed since people can negotiate directly themselves. The answer is that mediators usually are not needed. Indeed, some agents may have already done some of the kinds of things described here. (For example, including potential opponents may serve the same function.) However, there are some situations where there is not a sufficient level of trust or there is a value in having an experienced and impartial third party structure the process. This may be important when University Extension is perceived as a partisan of one point of view rather than simply a neutral facilitator.

I realize that you may decide that mediation is not suitable for working through community conflict over TAP issues but I decided to include this information in case you might find it useful.