

GRANT ENGAGEMENT DECISION GUIDE

PURPOSE

This document provides guidance to support consistent, intentional decisions about grant opportunities and the tradeoffs they require. It outlines shared expectations for faculty and leadership related to grant participation, workload alignment, collaboration, and protection of core capacity. Leadership, as referenced in this document, refers to Regional Directors (RDs), Senior Program Directors (SPDs), Education Directors (EDs), and programmatic unit Assistant Directors.

The goals of this guidance are to strengthen Extension's long-term sustainability, encourage appropriate use of generated revenue, and protect core staffing capacity and mission alignment.

MU Extension operates within a mixed funding model. Core funding provides stable, mission-critical capacity. Grants, contracts, and fees expand reach and responsiveness. For purposes of this guidance, core capacity refers to MU Extension's ability to deliver priority educational programming, maintain community and partner relationships, and fulfill responsibilities associated with core faculty appointments.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITIES

Faculty and leadership share responsibility for:

- Supporting grant-funded work that aligns with Extension priorities, community needs, and organizational capacity.
- Engaging in early communication and ongoing coordination among faculty and leadership regarding workload implications, resource needs, organizational priorities, and capacity impacts associated with grant-funded work.
- Ensuring grant-funded activities strengthen Extension programming and partnerships while maintaining core capacity.

Leadership also plays a role by:

- Supporting faculty in identifying and participating in appropriate grant opportunities.
- Facilitating collaborative planning to ensure grant commitments are appropriately aligned, scoped, and resourced.
- Supporting workload adjustments when grant participation changes priorities or role expectations.

COLLABORATION AND SHARED PLANNING

Competitive grants often require collaboration among campus faculty, field faculty, and Extension leadership. Faculty and leadership should be engaged early enough to meaningfully shape project scope, effort, and resource needs. Early engagement helps ensure Extension participation is strategic, appropriately scoped, and sustainable. Requests for letters of support or commitments to participate made after key project decisions have been finalized may limit the ability to assess workload, funding, and alignment with organizational priorities.

Faculty workload and capacity concerns should be addressed through discussion, prioritization, and role alignment rather than treated as fixed barriers to participation. In some cases, engagement in high-priority or mission-aligned grant work may require adjustment of existing responsibilities, programming expectations, or regional priorities. Such discussions are particularly important when grant involvement substantially affects programming expectations, requires reassignment of responsibilities, or changes the scope of a faculty member's role.

RIGHT-SIZING EFFORT AND VALUING EXTENSION CONTRIBUTIONS

There is no fixed expectation for percent effort on grants. However, effort level should be interpreted in terms of **impact on core capacity**. These ranges are intended to support discussion and planning and should not be interpreted as approval thresholds or required limits.

The following effort ranges should be interpreted based on the **cumulative** impact of grant-funded work on faculty workload and core responsibilities:

- **0–10%** → Typically additive, low impact on core work
- **10–25%** → Requires awareness and alignment
- **25%+** → Requires explicit discussion of tradeoffs
- **40%+** → Likely changes role expectations and warrants leadership review

Multiple smaller grants may collectively have the same workload and capacity impact as a single larger grant and should be evaluated accordingly.

Key question: What core capacity is strengthened, shifted, or reduced as a result of this grant?

A common challenge in grant-funded work is ensuring that proposed effort and funding accurately reflect the level of Extension work required. When effort and resources are not aligned, faculty may absorb additional, unfunded responsibilities, creating hidden workload, eroding core capacity, and misaligning expectations with available resources.

EVALUATING EFFORT AND FUNDING ALIGNMENT

When reviewing grant involvement, consider:

- Does the proposed FTE (full-time equivalent) accurately reflect the level of coordination, delivery, travel, and relationship management required?
- Does the faculty member(s) have sufficient capacity to maintain core responsibilities while delivering the proposed grant work?
- If funding levels are reduced, project expectations expand, or grant responsibilities are added, have effort, deliverables, and other workload expectations been adjusted accordingly?
- Would a reasonable external observer view the proposed funding as sufficient for the work described?

Simple test: If this work were fully and appropriately funded, what level of effort would it require? If the answer is higher than what is budgeted, there is a mismatch.

Be particularly attentive when:

- Faculty are asked to “just support” a project without clear scope or funding commitment
- A small amount of funding is attached to work that requires sustained engagement
- Faculty feel pressure to participate for relationship or visibility reasons despite insufficient support
- Projects expand in scope without corresponding adjustments in effort or funding

When effort and funding are not aligned, Extension leadership should work with faculty and project leads to:

- Adjust the scope of Extension involvement or renegotiate project expectations
- Recalibrate effort to match available funding. This may include adjusting project deliverables, grant responsibilities, programming expectations, or other workload commitments.
- Decline or limit participation when alignment cannot be achieved

As a general principle, if work requires 25% effort, it should be funded at 25% effort. Flexibility may be appropriate when work is highly aligned with core responsibilities and priorities. However, repeated reliance on unfunded effort can erode core capacity over time.

DECISION FRAMEWORK FOR GRANT PARTICIPATION

Use these questions to guide decisions about grant participation.

1. Mission and Program Alignment

- Does this align with Extension priorities and program direction?
- Does it address a clear community or partner need?

2. Impact on Core Responsibilities

- What core work will be reduced, delayed, or dropped?
- Is that tradeoff acceptable and understood?
- Who, if anyone, is absorbing that work?

3. Role Clarity

- Does the grant change the primary focus or expectations of the faculty member's role?
- If this level of effort continued, would we still define this as a core position?

4. Duration and Sustainability

- Is this short-term, pilot, or ongoing work?
- What happens when the grant ends?
- Are we creating reliance on temporary funding?

5. Local and Regional Relevance

- Does this connect to local, regional, statewide, or programmatic priorities?
- Are local partners engaged or benefiting?

6. System-Level Balance

- Is grant work distributed in a sustainable way across faculty?
- Are we unintentionally shifting core responsibilities to others?

These questions are intended to inform professional judgment and collaborative decision-making. Not every factor will apply equally in every situation. When differing perspectives exist regarding grant participation, the appropriate RD, SPD, and ED should work collaboratively with the faculty member to determine an approach that balances organizational priorities, capacity, and opportunity.

GUARDRAILS

To maintain consistency across the system:

- Grant funding should align with Extension priorities and local needs.
- Grant work should complement, not replace, core responsibilities.
- Faculty are not expected to generate funding to sustain their base position. However, grant proposals should include salary support for Extension effort when appropriate.
- Grant expectations should not be established without discussion of workload impact.

- Significant changes to role scope due to grants should be intentional and approved, not incremental or assumed.

WHEN TO RECONSIDER THE APPROACH

RDs, SPDs, and EDs should pause and reassess when:

- A grant significantly reshapes a faculty member's role
- Core programming begins to decline or disappear
- The work is not clearly connected to local or programmatic priorities
- There is no plan for sustainability beyond the grant period
- Faculty workload becomes imbalanced or unclear

These situations may indicate the need to adjust effort, rebalance responsibilities, consider an Opportunity Position, or evaluate whether a different staffing approach is more appropriate.

Grant engagement should strengthen, not diminish, Extension's mission and capacity. This guidance is intended to support thoughtful decisions that balance opportunity, workload, and long-term sustainability.

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RESOURCES

- [MU Extension Grants Determinations](#) (pre-award administration, shared credit info)
- [MU Extension Grants webpage](#) (timeline information, budget considerations, helpful resources, proposal/award data)
- [Grants Fact Sheet](#) – web page with required organizational info for many grants (indirect cost rates, audit reports, etc.)